

The State Education

May 2019

# Standard

*The Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education*



## **MOVING THE NEEDLE ON LITERACY**

Reading by Third Grade  
What Children with Dyslexia Need  
What English Learners Need  
Aligning to Learning Standards

# Standard

VOLUME 19 ■ ISSUE 2

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# Editor's Note

Valerie Norville  
Editorial Director

As anyone knows who remembers learning to read, or has taught their own or others' children to read, young readers pick up different literacy skills in different orders and at different rates. I have been struck, for example, by the fluency with which some English learners I've encountered can read, and equally struck by their inability to understand what most of it meant. My son, however, who was a whiz at phonics and content knowledge, struggled with fluency.

State boards of education would be well advised to step out of the line of fire in any discussion of reading that lines up behind a single approach or intervention. In this issue, Nell K. Duke compares teaching reading to running an E.R. in its complexity. For both, the stakes are high. So good preservice teacher preparation and continued professional development must be priorities for state boards of education, she writes.

Barbara Davidson contrasts two approaches that characterize today's classrooms: one puts the first foot on attainment of reading skills; the other stresses building content knowledge while learning to read. The latter camp argues that it is a mistake to spend so much time on skills that context is neglected. "And the burden of this lost opportunity," Davidson writes, "falls most heavily on children living in poverty and English learners, who tend to have the biggest knowledge gaps."

States that keep tabs on their disaggregated data cannot fail to note the stubborn reading gaps that persist for English learners. Tim Shanahan and Jana Echevarria point to the outsized impact of vocabulary instruction, and the lesser impact of phonics instruction, for this population. They call for better

professional development for teachers and more recognition of the value of including parents and maintaining dual-language use.

Sen. Bill Cassidy and Dr. Laura Cassidy bring the unique perspectives of policymaker and physician to their work on behalf of students with dyslexia. The Cassidys urge schools to screen for the condition, remove stigma, and get busy with evidence-based approaches to instruction for dyslexic students. One solution Dr. Cassidy puts forward: a charter school she helped found in Baton Rouge, where all the students have been diagnosed with dyslexia.

Two articles based on teacher surveys ask whether college- and career-ready standards have a role in creating proficient readers and writers. The work of Julia Kaufman and Darleen Opfer suggests that many teachers have only glancing familiarity with reading standards, nearly a decade after most states adopted the Common Core. An interesting exception is Louisiana, which succeeded in aligning its learning standards, teachers' understanding of them, and curriculum materials where other states have not.

Gary Troia's survey of teachers examines their attitudes about the Common Core. It finds that teachers were generally positive about the standards but that they did not believe they had received sufficient preparation to help students meet the writing standards in particular.

Finally, NASBE President and CEO Robert Hull interviews longtime literacy duo Meredith and David Liben, who urge state boards of education to wield their authority so that the country can finally move the needle on proficiency in reading and writing. ■

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# News & Notes

Early in 2019, the House Education and Labor Committee passed the Rebuild America's Schools Act (H.R. 865) on a 26-20 vote along party lines. The act would invest \$100 billion in school infrastructure through grants and tax credits. Under the bill, districts would seek competitive grant funding from their states and would be required to prioritize projects at schools serving high percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals. House Democratic leaders would like H.R. 865 to be part of a broader federal infrastructure package—if one emerges—so further action on the bill may be delayed. The bill's prospects in the Republican-held Senate seem dim, unless Democrats negotiate its inclusion in a more expansive infrastructure bill.

On March 14, NASBE sent a letter to Congress urging legislators to use the next version of the Higher Education Act (HEA) to address teacher shortages, especially in special education and high-need subjects like math and science. The Senate and House education committees held a series of higher education-focused hearings this spring, and NASBE expects the committees to consider legislation later

this year to update the HEA, including its programs on educator preparation and college access and success. In mid-March, the White House released the president's proposed HEA reauthorization principles, which largely focus on financial aid but also include an emphasis on policies with K-12 implications, including expanding student access to dual and concurrent enrollment opportunities.

The House Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee held a hearing in late February on schools' use of seclusion and restraint. Subcommittee Chairman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (D-NMI) declared that seclusion practices are inappropriate for schools and require resources and time that could be spent in the classroom. Ranking Member Rick Allen (R-GA) said every child is unique and a one-size-fits-all approach will not work, adding that the committee should tread carefully to ensure that legislation does not interfere with educators' abilities to respond quickly and efficiently to a dangerous situation. Democratic committee members will likely follow up on the hearing by reintroducing the Keeping All

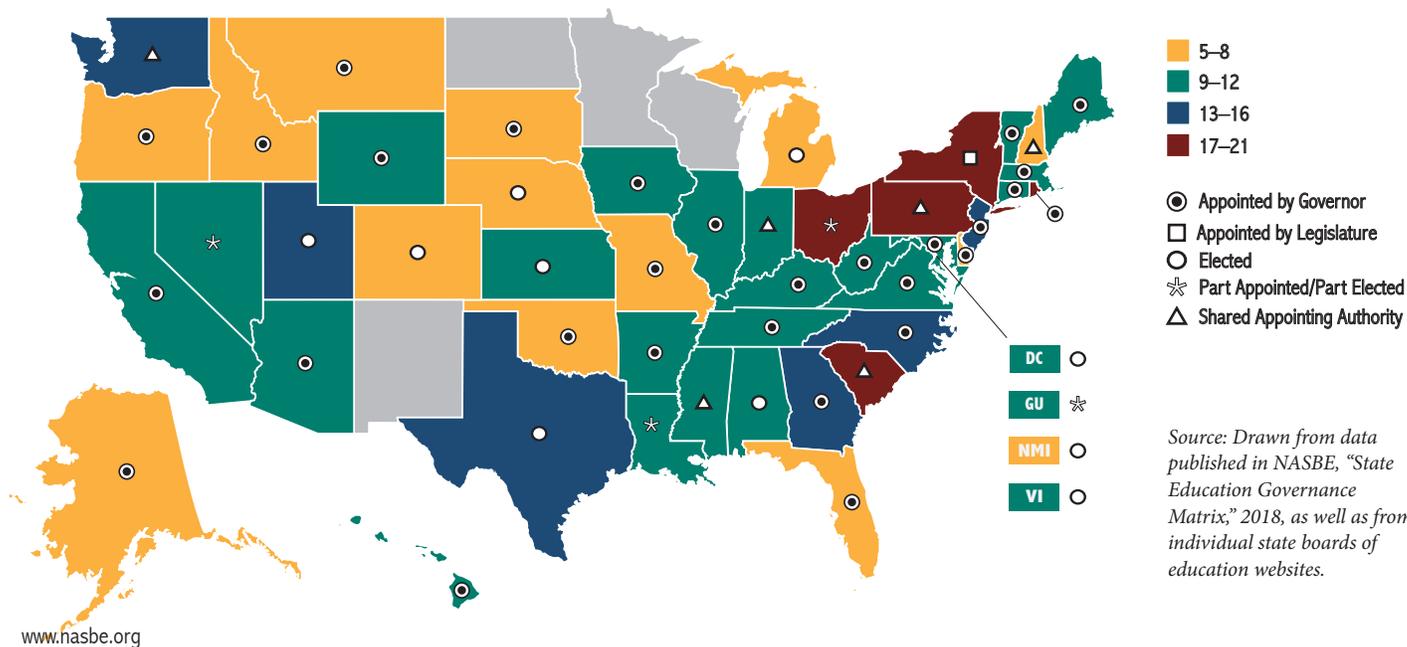
Students Safe Act, which the committee may consider later this year.

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos in late February announced support for a proposal to create a \$5 billion federal tax credit for those who donate to scholarships for private schools and other educational programs. The secretary made the announcement with Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Rep. Bradley Byrne (R-AL), who incorporated the proposal in legislation they introduced: the Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act. The proposal is not likely to move through either the Senate or House, given widespread Democratic opposition.

In a March *Federal Register* notice, the U.S. Department of Education asked for comments by early April on a survey to identify state and local activities supported by Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants under Title IV, Part A, of the Every Student Succeeds Act. The department will survey all states this spring to learn about activities that states and districts are using these funds to support.

*Thanks to Reg Leichty and his colleagues at Foresight Law + Policy for these updates.*

## SBE Governance by Number of Members and Method of Selection





**Todd Allen**  
Chair, National Council of  
State Education Attorneys

## NCOSEA Voice

### *Pleading the Case for All Students*

As we consider the topic of literacy in this issue of the *Standard*, I'm reminded of its importance to the legal profession. As attorneys, words are our tools. The legal profession originates in ancient Greece and Rome, where individuals were called upon to plead the case of another. Our entire profession is founded on reading, writing, and speaking on behalf of our clients. Attorneys are often criticized for legalese and confusing sentence structure. Although we can always improve our craft, these sometimes confusing words and phrases underscore the notion that words have very specific meanings, both of themselves and in the context in which they are used. Every day, attorneys must reach into their tool belts and select the correct words to advance their clients' interests. Along with my fellow attorneys, I recognize that membership in this profession would not be possible had not strong literacy skills been instilled in me at an early age.

Just as attorneys are called upon to plead cases on behalf of their clients, state boards of education are called upon—now more than ever—to plead the case of literacy for all students. Literacy opens doors of opportunity for students to pursue postsecondary education and training as well as careers that allow them to grow professionally, give back to their communities, and support themselves financially. Whether students wish to be attorneys or pursue countless other worthwhile and rewarding careers, they

should graduate armed with strong reading, writing, and speaking skills to equip them for the next step in life.

State boards of education play an important role in setting policy to ensure that all students—regardless of race, disability, or socioeconomic status—attain strong literacy skills. As an example, the Kentucky Board of Education recently amended state minimum high school graduation requirements in order to further emphasize reading and math skills. Nationally, state boards and educators are paying close attention to literacy skills at the early elementary level to ensure that students are progressing properly, ready for the next stage of challenging instruction in reading and writing. Although it often takes years to assess the outcome of a given state board policy decision, board members should be commended for their intentional focus on raising the bar for student literacy.

Representing the best interest of their clients is a duty that attorneys take seriously. We are called upon to act on behalf of clients in a legal system that can often be confusing and overwhelming. Sometimes attorneys are criticized for their representation of clients. Similarly, state boards of education are hard at work on behalf of students to advance literacy skills, even though stakeholders may, from time to time, criticize the policies they adopted to further that goal. But students across the nation depend on state boards to set challenging learning standards that will one day allow them to transition successfully to life's next step. ■

Several NASBE member states are using multimillion-dollar grants awarded through the federal Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Initiative to develop strategic plans for improving student literacy. The purpose of the U.S. Department of Education's program is to advance literacy skills—including preliteracy skills, reading, and writing—for students birth through grade 12, with a focus on English learners and students with disabilities. In all, this round of awards represents a total appropriation of \$380 million.

What is perhaps more impressive than the funding is the concentration on a comprehensive approach. What does it take to fully address and advance literacy skills? State boards of education should pay attention to the efforts of the state awardees.

Maryland's \$45 million Striving Readers grant emphasizes alignment across the entire state. As a result, Maryland awarded subgrants to all 24 local school systems. Priorities include use of evidence-based interventions and support to disadvantaged children. The Maryland State Board of Education is particularly interested in early literacy, so aligning language and literacy instruction from birth to age 5 with that for kindergarten through grade 12 is a priority. Maryland's Comprehensive Literacy Plan is based upon five keys included across all age bands. Among these are continuity of standards-based instruction and educational leadership.

Kansas's \$27 million award makes it possible to address literacy in intentional, focused ways that promote the Kansas State Board of Education's goal for students to leave the preK-12 system with the academic, cognitive, technical, and employability skills they need to be productive, engaged members of their

communities. Year one activities were designed to build capacity. A statewide LiNK (Literacy Network of Kansas) website shares best practices, targeted professional learning opportunities, and resources for children and their families. Subgrantees use data to make instructional decisions and promote kindergarten readiness for early learners.

Kentucky's Comprehensive Literacy plan—A Framework for Literacy to Unify and Engage Networks of Teachers—aims to refine and strengthen existing professional learning supports and systems for literacy development. Kentucky's nearly \$25 million award focuses on gains in oral language skills for four-year-olds, kindergarten readiness, increased reading proficiency at all school levels, and increased content proficiency at the secondary level.

Georgia was a grant recipient in 2011, with funds available over five years. Each year, Georgia added a cohort of schools and demonstrated that the longer schools engaged in focused, grant-funded literacy work, the better their students did. School leaders reviewed summer and out-of-school opportunities to ensure steady improvement and offset the "summer slide."

Georgia used findings from 2012–17 to shape its current Literacy for Learning, Living, and Leading in Georgia initiative. For example, Georgia now focuses more strongly on family and community engagement and support for teacher educators to grow "literacy leaders." In the new round of awards, Georgia topped the list of awardees at just over \$61.5 million.

These are a few examples of how states and state boards of education are striving to ensure each student becomes a successful reader and writer. As they develop their own approaches, other states with tenacious literacy challenges should watch and learn. ■



## Reading by Third Grade: How Policymakers Can Foster Early Literacy

*As in an E.R., there are many possible diagnoses and interventions in the classroom, and the stakes are high.*

**Neil K. Duke**

Reading by third grade is a hot topic. Dozens of state legislatures have passed laws aimed at improving early reading, many of them mandating retention if the job is not done by the end of grade 3. Everyone from philanthropists to publishers, from parents to the press, have fixed on it. And setting aside too many people's assumptions to the contrary, educators, teacher educators, and researchers across the nation work hard every day to figure

out how to build reading proficiency in individual children and groups of children.

This onslaught of attention is largely justified. Early reading achievement strongly predicts later school success, and early reading difficulties place learners at greater risk for a wide range of problems, from low achievement in other academic areas, to dropping out, and even to incarceration.<sup>1</sup> Getting off to a strong

start is particularly powerful. Put another way, it can be hard to catch up from a slow start. For all of these and other reasons, it makes sense for state policymakers to invest heavily in fostering early reading development.

## Third Grade Is Not Magical

At the same time, there is nothing magical about reading by third grade in particular. Reading achievement at the end of second grade is also predictive of later success, as are some measures of language and emerging literacy in preschool and kindergarten.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, instruction by grade 3 cannot entirely inoculate learners from later reading difficulties. Reading Shakespeare or a chemistry textbook pose their own challenges and illustrate why students need ongoing support to develop as readers.

Some argue for third grade as a linchpin because of the prevalent notion that children first learn to read and then, in fourth grade, read to learn. Although catchy, it is not actually true. Even very young children can learn from reading, first from books read to them and—well before third grade—from books they read themselves.<sup>3</sup> Most state learning standards expect reading to learn of some kind or another in kindergarten and first grade. Likewise,

learning to read does not end at fourth grade. Similarly, the fact that third grade is typically the first year in which states administer standardized tests of reading achievement is not reason enough to treat reading achievement at the end of this year as profoundly more important than at other grade levels before and after.

## Much More Than Decoding Words

One of first steps that state policymakers can take is to learn what reading is. So often, people assume that “reading” means a student can look at a list of words, and sound them out, or pronounce them correctly at sight. People are appalled that their schools have failed to teach students to do even that much by third or fourth grade.

But doing well on state summative tests of reading in third grade and beyond requires far, far more than the ability to read individual words (see box 1). A quick review of sample items from your state’s third-grade reading test will reveal what I mean. These tests are based on rigorous, wide-ranging state standards and typically include long passages of literary and informational text followed by questions on the intended meaning of words, paragraphs, or passages. Students are asked to comprehend

### Box 1.

The range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions entailed in state reading tests presents a formidable task for classroom teachers. Among other things, teachers need to develop children’s

- print awareness/concepts of print
- phonological awareness
- decoding and word recognition
- word-reading strategies
- comprehension monitoring
- reading fluency
- vocabulary knowledge
- vocabulary strategies
- morphological analysis
- science and social studies knowledge
- graphophonological semantic cognitive flexibility
- syntactic awareness
- text structure analysis
- executive skills (e.g., inhibitory control)
- genre knowledge
- comprehension strategies
- literal comprehension
- inferential comprehension
- critical comprehension
- scanning and skimming
- text navigation and search
- reading stamina
- facilitative reading attitudes

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**In too many U.S. schools, all elementary-age children who do poorly on the school's reading screening are placed in the same intervention.**

not only literally but to make inferences. They are asked to identify themes, main ideas, and specific rhetorical strategies. They are asked to compare and integrate information across multiple texts and to read not only written text but diagrams, graphs, and other devices that are used to convey meaning.

They may even be asked to write. One example: a fourth-grade reading item from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) asked this of students, after they read a three-page article about an aquarium's work with a baby great white shark: "Based on the article, is it a good idea to keep white sharks in captivity? Explain your answer using information from the article." Think for a moment about everything a student needs to know and be able to do to get this item correct. Reading and spelling words is crucial, to be sure, but so is a broad range of other knowledge (e.g., what is *captivity*?), skills (e.g., identifying relevant information), and dispositions (e.g., to slog through a long article and list of questions with full effort). So when you read that two-thirds of U.S. fourth graders are not proficient in reading on NAEP or half are not proficient on your state test, understand that it is not the case that these students cannot read a list of words—although that is true of some. Rather, this proportion of students do not yet have everything they need to perform proficiently.

For test items that include short answers or essays, students also need handwriting and/or keyboarding, spelling, writing fluency, various composition abilities, and facilitative dispositions toward writing. In any case, writing instruction clearly supports reading development—and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, policymakers should really be talking about literacy education, not just reading education.

## Why Students Get Off Track

Given how much goes into the ability to read, it should not be surprising that students struggle with reading for many different reasons. Some have terrible trouble reading words. Perhaps they have *dyslexia*, a specific neurobiological profile that makes learning to read (and spell) words more difficult than it is for most people. Or they may have received poor-quality or limited instruction to enable them to read words

(what I call *dysteachia*). Sometimes, both factors may be at work.

Still other students may be good at reading words—reading accurately, with automaticity and expression (what we call *fluency*)—and yet not understand what they read. Sometimes referred to as word callers, these students constitute a significant percentage of those who struggle on state tests of reading. A number of factors can be the source of the difficulty: a relative challenge with language processing (e.g., processing sentences that are long and complex); a mismatch between what the author of the text assumes they know and their actual vocabulary and background knowledge (content knowledge, cultural knowledge, etc.); and/or inadequate cognitive engagement (e.g., not generating necessary inferences or not generating mental images during reading).

Still other readers are not marshalling the executive skills needed for proficient reading. For example, they may struggle to focus on the text and inhibit thoughts that do not support meaning construction. They may exhibit relatively low cognitive flexibility, struggling to attend simultaneously to the many processes required for proficient reading. Those students require intervention that goes beyond literacy alone. And there are many other factors and many combinations in which they are manifested.

Given the variety of reading strengths and weaknesses that occur at varying degrees, it would be reasonable to guess that schools tend to match interventions to students' varied needs. However, in too many U.S. schools, all elementary-age children who do poorly on the school's reading screening are placed in the same intervention. Michigan State University professor Tanya Wright likens this to administering a vision screener and then giving everyone who fails it the same eyeglass prescription. There are myriad evidence-based practices that address specific literacy strengths and weaknesses, but most never make their way into practice.

## Reading Teachers Are Like E.R. Doctors

The demands of state reading tests and the myriad profiles of students' reading strengths and weaknesses are complex in and of themselves. But keep in mind that an elementary classroom teacher likely has at least 20 to 30

**Figure 1. Effective Professional Development**

	<b>Weak PD Processes</b>	<b>Strong PD Processes</b>
<b>Weak PD Content</b>	Little hope of improvement	Teachers get good at implementing practices that don't work
<b>Strong PD Content</b>	Teachers don't actually implement practices that do work	<b>Our best chance for improvement</b>

students, many areas to address other than reading (assemblies, mathematics, physical education, etc.), and only 180 days to do it all. In my view, teaching reading to a class of first graders is akin in complexity to being an emergency room physician, requiring a broad range of knowledge and skills and the ability to manage and coordinate many “cases” at once. One might argue that the stakes are higher in an E.R., but they are high in classrooms too, given that reading difficulties are associated with serious long-term effects, most notably dropping out of school, which is in turn associated with higher rates of incarceration, unemployment, and chronic health problems.<sup>5</sup> E.R. physicians have typically had four years of undergraduate school, four years of medical school, three to four years of residency, and perhaps even further specialized training to prepare them for the role. In contrast, one can be certified as an elementary school teacher after just an undergraduate degree, only part of which is focused on teacher preparation, or through alternative and emergency certification processes that involve even less preparation than that.

Because the complexity and the stakes of teaching are high, state policymakers should set rigorous standards for preservice teacher preparation. For example, Michigan’s newly adopted standards for preparation of pre-K to grade 3 teachers in English language arts and literacy provide pages of detail regarding what teacher candidates need to learn and be able to do, with expectations for 13 contributors to literacy that address what the construct

is, how it develops, how to assess it, and how to teach it, as well as three other strands on matters such as the classroom literacy environment and management of literacy instruction.<sup>6</sup> State policymakers also need to require that teacher preparation programs—all programs, including alternative certification programs—offer adequate course credits to address these standards, ensure that the courses are of high quality, allow candidates to specialize in specific developmental periods, and infuse many opportunities for prospective teachers to observe and experience scaffolded practice in implementing research-informed practices in actual classrooms with actual children.

But higher standards are not a silver bullet (nor is there any silver bullet). Among other things and no matter how strong our initial preparation of teachers, we need to provide continued professional learning throughout teachers’ careers. Much as we would not want to have a doctor who stopped learning about medicine after completing their initial training, we do not want to have teachers whose learning stops upon graduation. Fortunately, research reveals that professional development can have a significant impact on teachers’ practice and on children’s growth. To be most effective, professional development needs to be strong in both process and content (figure 1). Process-wise, one-day sit-and-get workshops with no follow up, which are still commonplace in K-12 education, are generally not effective. More extensive workshops involving active learning, opportunities to see practices modeled, an

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**State policymakers should set rigorous standards for preservice teacher preparation.**

environment with collective participation and goal setting, and opportunities to work with a literacy coach are among the professional development practices that enjoy research support. Content-wise, professional learning should focus on knowledge and practices that have been shown to be effective in research. The Washington DC Public Schools' LEAP (Learning Together to Advance our Practice) program is an example of an innovative approach to providing research-aligned professional learning in a large school district.

## Reading Education Should Be Research Informed

Imagine that you have a child who has leukemia. Consider what you would do in that situation. When I carry out this thought experiment in lectures and presentations, participants typically note that they would look to see what the latest research says about the treatment of leukemia and then make sure they have a doctor who is implementing the latest treatment with the best results. Let's apply this same thinking to reading education. Research should inform curriculum materials, assessments, and instruction of every classroom at every grade level. Too often, it does not. Programs and practices that do not work persist in many classrooms. I co-edit a book series, *Not This but That*, in which each of 14 books published so far takes on a practice that is widespread in U.S. classrooms but is not effective or is less effective than an alternative.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in a recent article, Heidi Mesmer and I identified a number of phonics faux pas that are likely having a significant negative impact on reading development.<sup>8</sup> More concerning, perhaps, are that there are so many practices that research has found to be effective but are not incorporated into curriculum materials or commonly implemented in U.S. classrooms.<sup>9</sup>

The United States needs to move to a much more research-informed culture in education. When a problem of practice arises, research ought to inform attempts to address it. When a dispute arises, research should inform a resolution. What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guides or the "Literacy Essentials" documents are positive examples of codifying information about practices that are research supported.<sup>10</sup> Major

influencers in reading education (and education in general) should be regular readers of actual, primary research published in peer-reviewed journals and regular users of research databases rather than relying on personal opinion or secondary and tertiary sources that are far removed from the original research they (sometimes inaccurately) cite. In selecting curricular materials, there should be a far greater emphasis on the degree to which they reflect research and far less emphasis on word-of-mouth recommendations or vendors' attestations.

## Equity Should Be Top of Mind

More so than many other industrialized nations, the United States has enormous gaps between its highest and lowest performing readers. These gaps are not randomly determined. Rather, some demographic groups have higher proportions of high-performing readers than others. We do not provide equitable educational opportunities. For example, in a study I conducted some time ago, I found that first-grade classrooms serving mostly children of high-socioeconomic-status families provided, on average, a much richer literacy environment and experiences than classrooms serving mostly children from families of low-socioeconomic status.<sup>11</sup> There are inequities in everything from the print on classroom walls to opportunities for higher-order discussion, from time devoted to building content knowledge for reading to opportunities to write for an audience beyond the teacher.

Inequity in opportunities for reading development are not limited to individual teacher practices. For example, access to high-quality preschool education is not equitably distributed. Because so many of the literacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions I discussed earlier begin to develop well before children enter kindergarten, and because preschool education can foster literacy development, uneven access to high-quality preschool education is quite problematic. Access to books and other written texts in homes, public libraries, stores, and schools is another inequity. Children with fewer books at home also have, on average, fewer books available to them in the community and in school.<sup>12</sup> High-speed internet access and other access to written text is also inequitably distributed in our

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**There are so many practices that research has found to be effective but are not incorporated into curriculum materials or commonly implemented.**

society. Yet greater access to books and summer reading opportunities supports reading growth. As I often say, learning to read without books is like learning to swim without water. In fact, there are a number of effective approaches to increasing book access and summer reading opportunities.<sup>13</sup> Policymakers and educators alike need to marshal the will, expertise, and resources to scale these approaches so they reach all children.

## What State Policymakers Can Do

Policymakers, including those on state boards of education, have an important role to play in improving early reading in the United States. Early reading matters, as does reading at other ages, thus the initiatives policymakers design or support should improve it. Recognizing that “reading” is much more than decoding words, state boards should understand—and communicate to others—the broad range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that state reading tests in third grade and beyond are measuring, and their policies should enable classroom instruction that reflects that breadth.

State boards should beware of those espousing a magic pill for their state’s early literacy problems. Interventions for those who struggle with reading should be differentiated based on students’ strengths and needs—not the “one size fits all” approach that so often occurs in practice. Teaching reading is highly complex—perhaps akin to working in an E.R.—and thus state policies should ensure that initial and ongoing professional learning is strong in process and content.

Research should inform not only the process and content of professional learning but also curriculum materials, daily teaching practices, and the entire culture of reading education. Drawing on research, policymakers can tackle the most inequitable aspects of our reading education system—for example, promoting policies that provide equitable opportunities to engage in higher order discussion, attend high-quality preschool, and access books and summer reading programs. Together, we can provide the effective early literacy education that every child deserves. ■

<sup>1</sup>On the association of poor early reading to poor later reading, see, e.g., Joy Lesnick et al., “Reading on Grade

Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment?” (Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010). On the association of poor later reading to a number of social costs, such as a greater likelihood of incarceration, see Elizabeth Greenberg et al., “Literacy behind Bars: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey,” NCES 2007-473 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Enis Dogan et al., “Early Childhood Reading Skills and Proficiency in NAEP Eighth-Grade Reading Assessment,” *Applied Measurement in Education* 28, no. 3 (2015): 187–201, doi: 10.1080/08957347.2015.1042157; Greg Duncan et al., “School Readiness and Later Achievement,” *Developmental Psychology* 43, no. 6 (2007): 1428–46, doi:10.1037/0012-1649.43.6.1428.

<sup>3</sup>This is true in both science and social studies. See, e.g., Marcia H. Davis and John T. Guthrie, “Measuring Reading Comprehension of Content Area Texts Using an Assessment of Knowledge Organization,” *The Journal of Educational Research* 108 (2015): 148–64, doi: 10.1080/00220671.2013.863749; Stephanie L. Strachan, “Kindergarten Students’ Social Studies and Content Literacy Learning from Interactive Read-Alouds,” *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 39 (2015): 207–23.

<sup>4</sup>Steve Graham and Michael Hebert, “Writing to Read: A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Writing and Writing Instruction on Reading,” *Harvard Educational Review* 81, no. 4 (Winter 2011); Steve Graham et al., “Reading for Writing: A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Reading Interventions on Writing,” *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 2 (April 2018): 243–84, doi: 10.3102/0034654317746927.

<sup>5</sup>Lesnick et al., “Reading on Grade Level”; Greenberg et al., “Literacy behind Bars.”

<sup>6</sup>As part of its Early Childhood Education Network initiative, NASBE supported work in Michigan on several early learning initiatives, including restructuring its licensure bands and supporting standards development.

<sup>7</sup>Books in the *Not This but That* series are listed on the publisher’s webpage, <https://www.heinemann.com/series/72.aspx> (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).

<sup>8</sup>Nell K. Duke and Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, “Phonics Faux Pas: Avoiding Instructional Missteps in Teaching Letter-Sound Relationships,” *American Educator* (Winter 2018–19).

<sup>9</sup>For a broad discussion, see Vivian Tseng, “The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice,” *Society for Research on Child Development Social Policy Report* 26 (2012): 1–23.

<sup>10</sup>The cited practice guides are available at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguides> and <http://www.Literacyessentials.org>.

<sup>11</sup>Nell K. Duke, “For the Rich It’s Richer: Print Experiences and Environments Offered to Children in Very Low- and Very High-SES First Grade Classrooms,” *American Educational Research Journal* 37 (2000): 441–78.

<sup>12</sup>Susan Neuman and Donna Celano, “Access to Print in Low-Income and Middle-Income Communities: An Ecological Study of Four Neighborhoods,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2001): 8–26; Shana Pribesh et al., “The Access Gap: Poverty and Characteristics of School Library Media Centers,” *Library Quarterly* 81 (2011): 143–60.

<sup>13</sup>James S. Kim and David M. Quinn, “The Effects of Summer Reading on Low-Income Children’s Literacy Achievement from Kindergarten to Grade 8: A Meta-Analysis of Classroom and Home Interventions,” *Review of Educational Research* 83 (2013): 386–431.

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**Learning to read without books is like learning to swim without water.**

**Nell K. Duke is a professor at the University of Michigan’s School of Education.**



# Reading Comprehension: Two Approaches

*Learning the difference should nudge state boards to ask whether curricula are building students' content knowledge.*

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**Barbara R. Davidson**

Teachers of elementary English language arts/literacy (ELA) tend to line up behind one of two very different approaches to reading instruction. In a forthcoming book, journalist Natalie Wexler reports observations she made in two classrooms that serve to illustrate the difference:

The focus of the lesson in Ms. Arredondo's first-grade classroom is the skill of identifying captions. A recent test had shown that most students could not distinguish them from subtitles, though she had explained they are labels that tell them about pictures. She repeats the definition, but the students are not grasping it. "Words?" one student ventures, when asked to repeat the definition. When Ms. Arredondo shows them a book with a picture of a shark, they are eager to know what the shark is eating. When she shows them a picture of a planet, they want to know if it is the moon. But Ms. Arredondo does not answer these questions because the point of the lesson is not learning about sharks or planets but identifying captions.

In Ms. Williams's first-grade classroom, students are reading a book about mummies. They already have lots of ideas about mummies—derived from movies and TV—but today they listen, rapt and open-mouthed, as Ms. Williams tells them what mummies are really like and what scientists can tell about them: that one ancient man used hair gel, that another's last meal was vegetable soup. Along the way she casually points out "text features" that elsewhere would be the focus of instruction.... When Ms. Williams asks the children if they have questions, hands fly up: "Can they tell how the mummy died? . . . Was the soup still in the mummy's stomach?"

Kids groan when it is time to stop—some of them still have their hands in the air. But they will be reading about mummies for the next seven weeks as part of lessons on Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, and Ms. Williams promises that their questions will all be answered.<sup>1</sup>

The first approach prioritizes reading comprehension strategies over content. The second rests on the idea that building background knowledge of the world, including the vocabulary that accompanies such knowledge, is a more powerful way to develop strong readers. This article will explore the tension between the two approaches and suggest a role state boards of education might play in navigating these tensions.

## The Skills-First Strategy

Considered a critical component of "balanced literacy," the teaching of reading comprehension strategies is pervasive in elementary education. Walk into almost any K-5 classroom, and you will see signs promoting reading strategies (e.g., predict, visualize, connect, synthesize), prompts to get students to remember what good readers do (e.g., analyze the author's purpose, make inferences), and posters with such probing questions as "How can readers describe concepts using a cause and effect relationship?" or "How do captions and subtitles help us understand a nonfiction text?"

The strategies approach is generally associated with another nearly universal practice: guided reading, in which the teacher works with groups of students at roughly the same reading level and supports their reading of "just right" texts—that is, readings at a level that do not demand a great deal of struggle on the

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**State policy may have inadvertently suggested to educators that mastery of strategies was the goal.**

group's part. A characteristic feature of guided reading is teacher prompting of students to draw on targeted reading comprehension strategies as they make their way through the texts. Often, texts used in guided reading are selected for the specific purpose of enabling such practice. According to a 2016 RAND report, "Leveled readers were the dominant reading instructional materials reported [used] by teachers, especially at the elementary level, where 80 percent of ELA teachers reported using leveled readers at least once per week, and 59 percent reported using them daily or almost daily."<sup>2</sup> (Also see the authors' article on page 18.)

How did the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies become so widespread? Certainly, one factor was how prominently they figured in discussion of the much-heralded National Reading Panel report in 2000.

An effort to settle the "reading wars" between those advocating phonics and those championing a "whole language" approach,<sup>3</sup> the panel's report was controversial from the start.<sup>4</sup> While the primary message—and the subject of much federal and state policy in its wake—confirmed the importance of systematic phonics instruction, the panel also identified benefits from reading comprehension strategies, particularly of monitoring students' understanding of what they had read. The report suggested ways students might achieve this metacognition—for example, by frequent summarizing, asking and answering questions, or visualizing.

Of the 204 studies on reading comprehension examined by the National Reading Panel, it should be noted, few extended beyond six weeks. And herein lies the problem. If all showed positive effects but none lasted more than six weeks, how can researchers justify urging an approach to reading comprehension that extends over an entire school year, year after year?

In fact, cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham, who has focused much of his recent work on improving reading instruction, has concluded, "Reading strategies do not build reading skill, but rather are a bag of tricks that can indirectly improve comprehension. These tricks are easy to learn and require little practice."<sup>5</sup> He adds that comprehension monitoring "may be more like a trick in that it's easy to learn

and use, and the only difficulty is to consistently remember to apply it. An analogous process may be checking one's work in mathematics. There is not a lot to learn in checking your work; it's not a skill that requires practice. But you do have to remember to do it."

In any case, the National Reading Panel did not indiscriminately commend all reading comprehension strategies. The studies it highlighted supported students' learning to question themselves while reading in order to increase understanding. It cited no studies demonstrating the effectiveness of finding the main idea, learning to infer, or comparing and contrasting—all of which consume countless classroom hours.

It is also quite likely the case that the accountability movement—with its emphasis on "data-driven instruction"—contributed to the dominance of the reading strategies approach. In creating learning standards that met the test for being "clear and specific" and in overseeing high-stakes tests that claimed to assess mastery of what were often as many as 40 ELA standards per grade, state policy may have inadvertently suggested to educators that mastery of strategies was the goal. Given the paucity of professional development at the time to help teachers learn how to teach to standards and weak curriculum to support them, it is little wonder that many teachers concluded strategies could be learned in isolation and that context was to a great extent irrelevant.

In this environment, standards-based formative assessments claiming to isolate skills and strategies; learning management systems promoting remediation to address skill deficits; and shiny, new leveled-reading materials tied to strategies work all sounded good. Given the flood of products supporting this approach, teachers can certainly be forgiven for assuming that mastery of reading comprehension strategies would deliver the literacy goods.

## **The Knowledge-Building Approach**

The knowledge-building approach—which is both new and very old—argues that the purpose of reading, beyond pleasure, is to learn things, and that in order to learn things from text, one has to know a little something about the topic that appears on the page or screen. The approach relies on cognitive science, which holds that

the amount of information readers can keep in working memory is small. Only a few items can be held in suspension while readers are working on a problem (like figuring out a word's meaning), and they can only be held there for a few seconds. So while it is possible for students to handle a couple of unfamiliar words and concepts when they encounter them in their reading, the cognitive load of much more than that shuts them down.

The Knowledge Matters Campaign asserts that reading with understanding depends far more on what a child already knows about the topic in the text than any strategy she might employ.<sup>6</sup> E. D. Hirsch Jr. compares background knowledge to Velcro; the more you have, the easier it is for additional knowledge and vocabulary to “stick.”<sup>7</sup> Studies support this view. Poor readers who know something about a subject comprehend text better than good readers who are unfamiliar with the topic,<sup>8</sup> and students who read a series of texts on a single topic are likely to learn new vocabulary four times faster than when they are jumping from topic to topic, as happens in strategies-based instruction.<sup>9</sup>

A knowledge-building approach to reading is distinguished from the reading strategies approach by the texts students are asked to read. Knowledge-building texts—whether informational or narrative—immerse students in content that builds their knowledge of the world and is rich in the vocabulary used to describe it. By nesting new content in familiar subject matter, access to increasingly complex words and ideas becomes more automatic.

Knowledge zealots claim no role at all for teaching comprehension strategies and criticize the strategies camp for treating content merely as a delivery mechanism for skills. But most in the knowledge-building camp do not so much eschew comprehension strategies as argue that the scales have tipped too heavily in their favor. They would argue that spending an inordinate amount of time teaching them without regard to the context—that is to say the *content*—to which they are applied is squandering an opportunity. And the burden of this lost opportunity falls most heavily on children living in poverty and English learners, who tend to have the biggest knowledge gaps.

## Curriculum Renaissance

The Common Core State Standards and other college- and career-ready standards now in place in most states acknowledge the tension between standards—which, in the case of English language arts, are skills-focused—and content. Authors of the Common Core ELA standards addressed this tension in the CCSS preamble: “By reading texts in history/social studies, science and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.”

Over the past five or more years, a new breed of English language arts curriculum has been developed that is beginning to make inroads into classroom practice and also reshaping the thinking about reading comprehension. Products such as Core Knowledge Language Arts, EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning), Wit & Wisdom, and American Reading Company all use a knowledge-building approach and do so without ignoring reading comprehension strategies. Each prioritizes content differently (e.g., Core Knowledge is more history/civics-focused, EL is more science-centric), and consequently they deliver substantively different learning experiences. But the focus is squarely on stitching in the Velcro and not primarily on building proficiency in comprehension strategies.

## Call to Action

There are compelling reasons why state board members should want to understand how educators in their state think about improving reading comprehension—and to investigate the degree to which existing policies encourage or discourage the adoption of high-quality curriculum.

First, there is good and growing evidence that quality curriculum may be one of, if not *the* most powerful driver of student academic success. In an extensive review of the literature on the impact of curriculum conducted for my organization, StandardsWork, David Steiner of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Educational

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**Most in the knowledge-building camp do not so much eschew comprehension strategies as argue that the scales have tipped too heavily in their favor.**

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**State boards might want to conduct an audit to determine the degree to which policies are in place to encourage the adoption of high-quality, aligned curriculum.**

Policy concluded that “curriculum is deeply important [and] that a teacher’s or district’s choice of curriculum can substantially impact student learning.”<sup>10</sup> (He also cites research that says “effective curricula cost, on average, no more than weak curricula.”)

Yet it is “business as usual” across the country for teachers to use curriculum materials they have created themselves or found on the internet.<sup>11</sup> While a certain degree of such poaching makes sense, it is also the case that “materials created or selected by teachers are less likely than those provided by their district to meet academic standards appropriate to the grade level.”<sup>12</sup>

A second and perhaps the most important consideration for state boards of education as they dip their toe into the reading comprehension waters is to reflect on equity. As the Knowledge Matters Campaign puts it, “While all students need and will benefit from an increased focus on building knowledge, the greatest beneficiaries of knowledge building will be our most vulnerable students.”<sup>13</sup> Poor students growing up in homes with less educated parents and without access to the many extracurricular activities that privilege provides are often the ones with the least amount of background knowledge on which to build. They have the greatest deficits of vocabulary and general knowledge as a result of exposure to fewer spoken words, access to fewer books at home, and more limited opportunities for travel. Children growing up in poverty rely on school to give them the Velcro they need for knowledge from complex informational and literary texts to stick. If it is not learned at school, it is unlikely to get learned at all.<sup>14</sup>

Third, small nonprofits created much of the new curricula that exists to meet the higher demands of the Common Core and other college- and career-ready standards—curricula that reflects the need for a significant shift in instructional practices as discussed here. But these nonprofits face obstacles in competing with major publishing houses for districtwide textbook adoption under traditional procurement policies. Not only does the cost of participating often preclude them, reviewers who participate in such processes do not always know how to evaluate materials for alignment

to the new standards. State boards might want to conduct an audit to determine the degree to which policies are in place to encourage the adoption of high-quality, aligned curriculum—curriculum that, in the case of ELA, is knowledge building and provides an appropriate but not inordinate focus on reading comprehension strategies.

In navigating one’s way around the debate about reading comprehension, it is worth considering these words from education expert Dylan Wiliam:

The big mistake we have made in the United States, and indeed in many other countries, is to assume that if we want students to be able to think, then our curriculum should give our students lots of practice in thinking. This is a mistake because what our students need is more to think *with*. The main purpose of curriculum is to build up the content of long-term memory so that when students are asked to think, they are able to think in more powerful ways because what is in their long-term memories makes their short-term memories more powerful. That is why curriculum matters.<sup>15</sup>

While it has generally not been the role of state boards of education to dictate curriculum to districts, it is a legitimate aim of state policy to ensure that students are thinking about topics more than they are thinking about reading comprehension strategies and that students’ knowledge of the world is at a minimum growing on par with their ability to apply these strategies. These concerns point toward a more active state role in incentivizing good decisions on reading/literacy curriculum than has heretofore been the case. ■

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Natalie Wexler, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System—and How to Fix It* (New York: Avery, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Julia H. Kaufman et al., “Creating a Coherent System to Support Instruction Aligned with State Standards: Promising Practices of the Louisiana Department of Education” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> I will not address this issue here, other than to say that I do not minimize the very important role for systematic phonics instruction in teaching children to read. Quite the contrary, because the evidence for phonics instruction is so well established, I think discussion ought to be refocused on how, once students possess foundational skills, they should begin to make meaning from texts and use reading to grow their understanding of the world.

<sup>4</sup> National Reading Panel, “Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading

Instruction,” Reports of the Subgroups (Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>Daniel T. Willingham, “The Usefulness of Brief Instruction in Reading Comprehension Strategies,” *American Educator* (Winter 2006/7).

<sup>6</sup>Knowledge Matters Campaign, “Restoring Wonder and Excitement to the Classroom” (2016), <http://knowledgematterscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WhyKnowledgeMatters-1.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Why Knowledge Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup>Donna R. Recht and Lauren Leslie, “Effect of Prior Knowledge on Good and Poor Readers’ Memory of Text,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80, no. 1 (1988): 16–20.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas K. Landauer and Susan Dumais, “A Solution to Plato’s Problem: The Latent Semantic Analysis Theory of Acquisition, Induction, and Representation of Knowledge,” *Psychological Review* 104, no. 2 (1997): 211–40; Gina Cervetti et al., “Conceptual Coherence, Comprehension, and Vocabulary Acquisition: A Knowledge Effect?” *Reading and Writing* 29, no. 4 (January 2016), doi: 10.1007/s11145-016-9628-x.

<sup>10</sup>David Steiner, “Curriculum Research: What We Know and Where We Need to Go” (StandardsWork, March 2017), <https://standardswork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/sw-curriculum-research-report-fnl.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup>Darleen Opfer et al., “Implementation of K–12 State

Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts and Literacy: Findings from the American Teacher Panel” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

<sup>12</sup>TNTF, “Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us about How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It” (New York, 2018).

<sup>13</sup>Knowledge Matters Campaign, “It’s Time for a Reading Reset!” (N.d.), <http://knowledgematterscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/KMC-Announcement-re-2018-NAEP-v2.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup>Last winter, members of the Knowledge Matters Campaign visited schools across the country serving low-income students who are using a knowledge-rich ELA curriculum to close the knowledge gap. A travel blog from that tour can be found at [www.knowledgematterscampaign.org/school-tour/](http://www.knowledgematterscampaign.org/school-tour/).

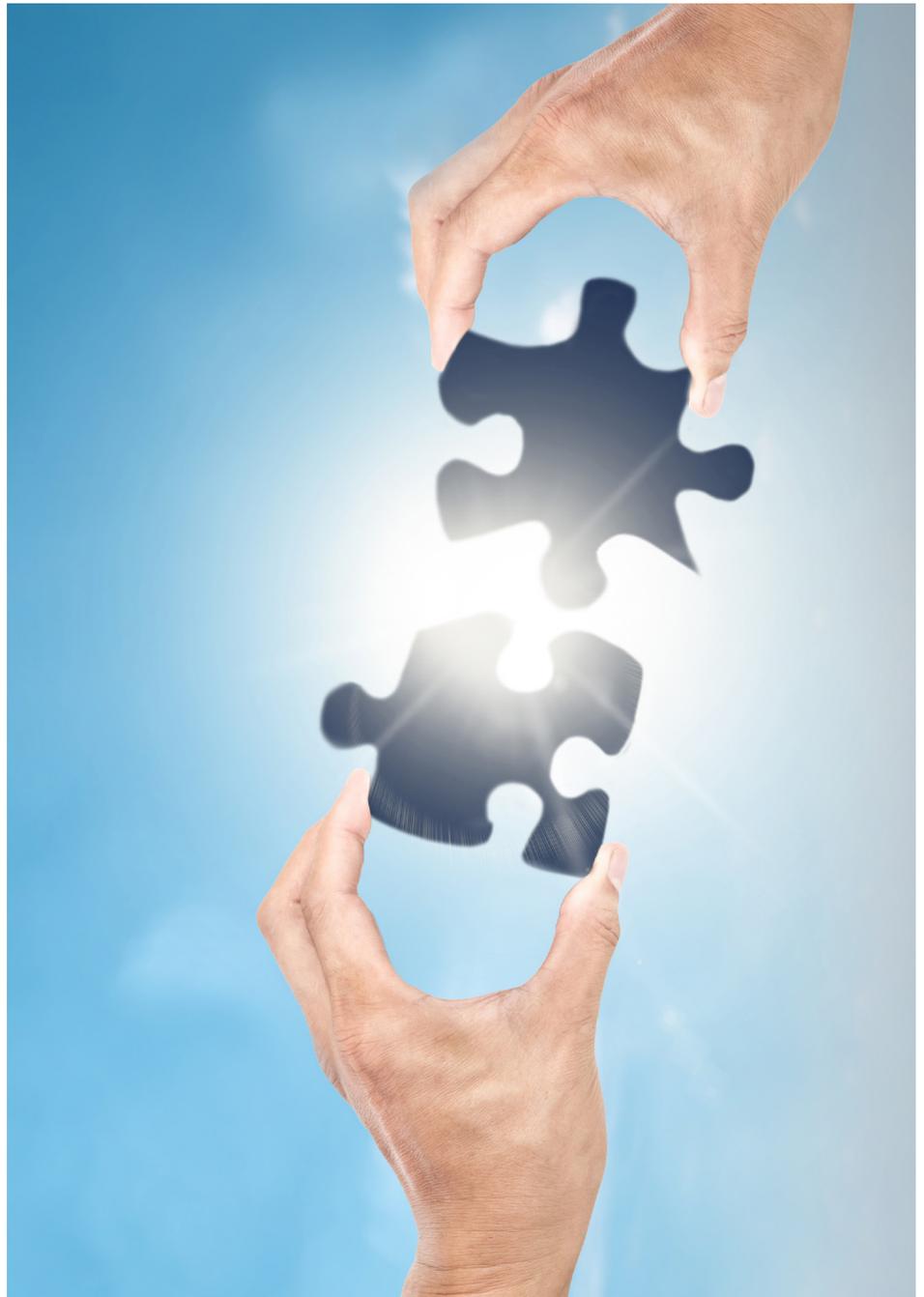
<sup>15</sup>Dylan Wiliam, *Creating the Schools Our Children Need: Why What We’re Doing Now Won’t Help Much and What We Can Do Instead* (York, PA: Learning Sciences International, 2018).

# The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Model

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*While most ELA teachers have not been aligning class materials to state standards, Louisiana teachers are outliers.*

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**Julia H. Kaufman and  
V. Darleen Opfer**

## Equipping Teachers to Align ELA Instruction to Standards

Current state standards set an ambitious vision for English language arts (ELA) and demand much of teachers: They are expected to engage students in close readings of complex, grade-level

texts, which in turn requires students to comprehend texts, follow authors' development of ideas, interpret words and phrases, and analyze structure. Yet most teachers do not know much about

the standards, and they often lack standards-aligned instructional materials to help students meet them.

Through the RAND American Teacher Panel—a nationally representative, longitudinal panel of teachers—we surveyed a randomly selected sample of K-12 public teachers in the U.S. in 2015, 2016, and 2017. The panel included representative samples of teachers for several states. Our study asked two main questions about ELA teachers’ responses: Do teachers know key aspects of their state standards for ELA? Do teachers have access to high-quality ELA instructional materials that can help them address those standards in the classroom?

The bottom line: Most ELA teachers do not know what their standards promote, much less use instructional materials that would allow them to address their standards. These findings changed very little over the three years. That is, most teachers did not gain knowledge about their standards over time. In fact, they appear to know less about their state ELA standards now than they did three years ago. Further, they are not using more standards-aligned published materials, although they may yet turn to standards-aligned textbooks as more high-quality materials enter the market and are adopted by districts.

Yet responses of teachers from one state—Louisiana—were somewhat of an outlier. Compared with other U.S. teachers, Louisiana teachers appeared to know more about their state ELA standards, use more standards-aligned materials, and report more standards-aligned instruction.

To get a handle on how well teachers know their ELA standards, the RAND survey asked them which of the following approaches for selecting texts were most aligned with their state standards:

- selecting texts for individual students based on their reading level;
- using abridged or adapted versions of complex texts for struggling readers;
- assigning complex texts that all students in a class are required to read; or
- selecting texts for a class based on qualitative factors like knowledge demands, as well as qualitative factors like word and sentence length.

The third and fourth approaches on this list align with most current college- and career-ready standards. Nearly all states have standards for text complexity, and many promote methods for determining text complexity.<sup>1</sup>

The survey also asked teachers which reading approach was most aligned with their standards:

- teach particular novels, books, short stories, essays, and poems that students should read and then organize instruction around them, teaching a variety of reading skills and strategies as tools for students to understand texts; or
- focus on reading skills and strategies first (e.g., main ideas, summarization, author’s purpose), and then organize teaching around those skills and strategies so students can apply them to any book, short story, essay, or poem they read.

Most state standards emphasize text-focused instruction (i.e., using evidence from texts to make justifications and conclusions),<sup>2</sup> and when their standards mention comprehension skills like finding a main idea or the author’s purpose, they call for applying these skills in relation to texts and do not advocate for teaching them in isolation.

## What Teachers Know about Standards

In response to our annual surveys, the majority of U.S. teachers tended to choose the approaches that were less aligned with standards rather than the more aligned ones. Less than half of teachers thought that “assigning complex texts that all students were required to read” and “selecting texts [based on qualitative and quantitative factors]” were aligned with their standards (figure 1). Similarly, lower percentages of teachers chose “assigning complex texts that all students are required to read” in 2017 compared with 2016. In response to each survey, over 70 percent of teachers reported that a “focus on reading skills and strategies first” was most aligned with their standards, despite the fact that no ELA and literacy standards explicitly advocate for teaching skills in isolation of texts.

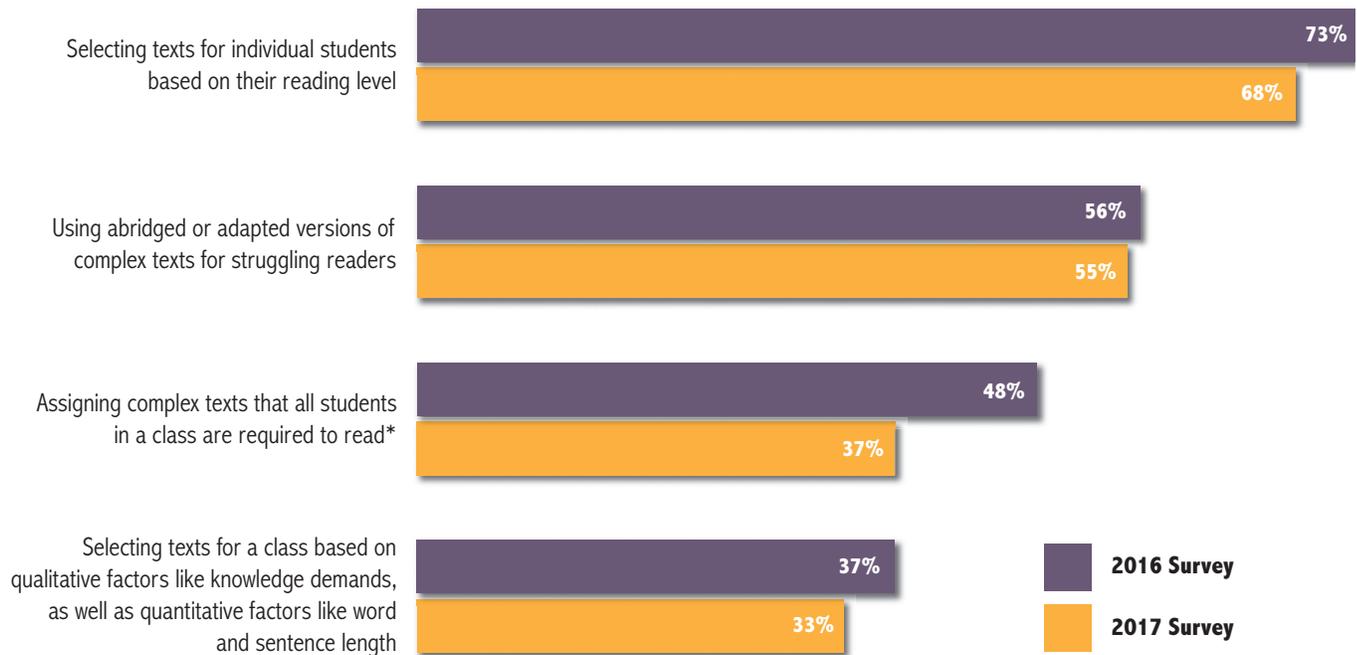
What explains this gap between what most state standards for ELA and literacy actually say and what teachers think they say? The obvious explanation is that teachers are not exposed to

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**Louisiana teachers appeared to know more about their state ELA standards, use more standards-aligned materials, and report more standards-aligned instruction.**

**Figure 1. ELA Teachers Indicating Approach Aligns with State Standards, 2016 and 2017 (percent)**

English Language Arts Teachers Indicating Each Approach Was Aligned with Their Standards in 2016 and 2017 (N=434)



NOTE: Asterisk indicates significant difference between the same teachers' responses in 2016 and 2017,  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Julia H. Kaufman et al. *Changes in What Teachers Know and Do in the Common Core Era: American Teacher Panel Findings from 2015 to 2017*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018.

enough information about the content of their state standards. Or teachers may be receiving many conflicting messages about what is “standards-aligned” within the instructional materials they use, as well as the training and support they receive.

By far, the most commonly reported ELA materials used at the elementary and secondary level were leveled readers and tools that differentiate the difficulty of reading materials for students at different reading levels (e.g., Accelerated Reader, Reading A-Z, and RAZ-Kids). In addition, some of the most widely used ELA textbooks (e.g., Journeys, Reading Street, and Holt McDougal Literature) have been rated by EdReports.org—an independent organization that reviews instructional materials—as

not meeting the expectations of college- and career-ready standards.

Use of leveled readers is not necessarily misaligned with the college- and career-ready standards in place in most states. Teachers could provide students with “just-right” (i.e., leveled) texts during independent reading time while helping them access complex texts during whole-class instruction. Some reading experts encourage this, finding it appropriate and aligned with the college- and career-ready standards.<sup>3</sup> That said, around one-third of elementary teachers in the survey indicated they use leveled readers during half or more of whole-class time, which implies that many students are not exposed to challenging texts at all.

Reading series that include leveled readers

can deepen teachers' confusion about what is aligned with their standards. Nearly every current textbook series publisher, including many with leveled readers, markets its alignment or "correlation" with the Common Core and college- and career-ready standards.<sup>4</sup> Also, many professional development resources that market themselves as standards-aligned provide very different messages about what this instruction should look like.<sup>5</sup>

Whether leveled readers do or do not help students learn to read is a separate question that we did not address in this research. While several studies have suggested that students' reading improves when they are taught using challenging texts at or above their grade level, researchers have often emphasized the need for more studies on this issue.<sup>6</sup> Our point is simply that teachers do not appear to know that their state standards generally emphasize use of complex texts and say nothing about use of leveled readers.

It falls to state education agencies and school systems to give teachers clear messages about what their ELA standards emphasize and which instructional materials could help teachers address those standards. Historically, school systems have taken on the brunt of this obligation, despite not always having the expertise and capacity. School systems also vary considerably in both the demographics and needs of students they serve and the resources they receive to support those students.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their potential role in providing more equitable supports across districts, state education agencies and state boards of education have generally not been regarded as a major player in guiding instruction. Instead, they traditionally adopt standards and approve lists of instructional materials. However, most research suggests that the myriad ways teachers try to make sense of standards guidance lead to large variations in the quality of classroom instruction.<sup>8</sup>

Given the immense burdens teachers face in aligning their instruction with learning standards, policymakers must consider two foundational needs to help cultivate and support that instruction. First, teachers need clear explanation of the standards. Communicating the goal of the standards is vital if teachers are to implement the ambitious, text-focused instruction as intended. Second, teachers require

instructional materials that are closely aligned with standards. If this alignment does not exist, teachers will lack the tools—and the guidance—to consistently address the standards in their instruction.

## State Strategies in Louisiana

Can state leadership make a difference? Using American Teacher Panel data to compare reports from state-representative samples of teachers to reports from the national sample, we found that Louisiana teachers appeared to know more about their state ELA standards than teachers elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, while 70 percent of ELA teachers in states with college- and career-ready standards indicated that "selecting texts for individual students based on their reading levels" aligns with their state standards, only 47 percent of Louisiana teachers gave this response. And while 75 percent of surveyed ELA teachers indicated that a "focus on reading skills first" most aligns with their state standards, only 49 percent of Louisiana teachers said so. Almost half of Louisiana teachers still chose approaches not aligned with their standards, yet the percentage of those responses were much smaller than in other states.

Louisiana teachers were also significantly more likely to use ELA instructional materials that send clearer messages about what approaches are most aligned with their standards, including EngageNY.org materials—which have been reviewed by EdReports.org as meeting expectations for college and career readiness—their state education agency website, and Corestandards.org. Higher percentages of Louisiana ELA teachers also reported that their students engaged in some standards-aligned practices daily compared with teachers elsewhere, including the use of evidence from a text to make inferences or support conclusions and analysis of the structure of texts.

These findings suggest that state education agencies can help teachers gain clearer knowledge about their standards and align their instruction to them. Our current work explores how Louisiana state policies could be doing so. One of our early reports shows three strategies the Louisiana Department of Education employs: "(1) a coherent academic

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**Teachers do not appear to know that their state standards generally emphasize use of complex texts and say nothing about use of leveled readers.**

■

**States generally do not have clear standards by which to judge the quality of teachers' professional development.**

strategy focused on integration, alignment and quality among systems supporting standards; (2) transparent and regular communication about academics within the state department of education and across layers of the education system; and (3) strong support for local decision making and ownership of change by districts and teachers.”<sup>10</sup>

In regard to the first strategy, Louisiana has posted public, online reviews that identify curricula closely aligned with standards for ELA and mathematics. These reviews rate materials as tier 1 (exemplifying quality), tier 2 (approaching quality), and tier 3 (not representing quality). They have posted reviews for over 50 commonly used textbooks for ELA alone, and they have partnered with LearnZillion to develop their own free, online standards-aligned ELA units for grades K-12, the Louisiana English Language Arts Guidebooks. In addition to state contracts incentivizing the purchase of tier 1 materials, the department provides free trainings that focus considerable attention on tier 1 materials, as well as a professional development catalog that prioritizes inclusion of vendors closely aligned with tier 1 curricula and formative assessments. The state has thus designed a coherent system for using tier 1 curricula and the standards-aligned messages within those curricula.

To implement the second strategy, state officials integrate topics on the centrality of academics and subject-area content into all their internal discussions, as well as paying attention to making whatever messages they send to educators and other stakeholders consistent. The department also communicates regularly and consistently with various levels in school systems through many mechanisms. For example, officials regularly schedule phone calls and webinars with superintendents and hold separate meetings with assistant superintendents or central office/curriculum supervisors and school principals. They establish these scheduled interactions well in advance and include them on an annual calendar. Louisiana cultivates teacher leadership and expertise through Teacher Leader Collaboratives, which include regional meetings throughout the year and an annual teacher summit. In addition, the department recently began training some teachers to be “content leaders” through intensive, multiday trainings designed to

support standards-aligned instruction.

The third strategy emphasizes tools to help districts, schools, and teachers make informed decisions about curricula, assessments, professional development, and instruction. Although the department provides lots of information and incentives for use of the materials, assessments, and training designated as high-quality, it does not require their use.

Louisiana is not the only state encouraging use of high-quality materials and professional development. In 2017, the Council of Chief State School Officers formed a High Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development Network of eight states— Delaware, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Wisconsin—that are seeking to increase the capacity of school systems to provide teachers with high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials. These states aim to clearly inform teachers and districts about materials and encourage their effective use through professional development and other tools and supports. Our forthcoming work already indicates that teachers in those states use more ELA and mathematics materials that “meet expectations,” according to EdReports.org reviews, than teachers in other states.

The work of these states is important because, while most states require teachers to acquire a certain number of professional development credits to maintain their certification, states generally do not have clear standards by which to judge the quality of teachers' professional development. Fewer than 15 states hold professional development providers accountable to provide high-quality, standards-aligned professional development.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, only a handful of states had adopted research-based standards for professional development by 2009.<sup>12</sup>

All states can play a discernible role in steering teachers toward high-quality materials that are aligned with ELA standards. In Louisiana—as well as other states—evidence suggests that state policies make a difference in encouraging teachers' use of high-quality instructional materials. In addition, Louisiana teachers showed a much better understanding about standards-aligned approaches compared with teachers elsewhere. These differences could stem from greater use of high-quality materials among

Louisiana teachers, in addition to other state strategies such as alignment among curriculum, professional development, and assessments; good communication between the state education agency and educators; and the state's support for informed, local decision making.

To encourage use of high-quality materials and better teacher knowledge about standards, state boards of education could ask their state agencies how they plan to ensure coherence across the instructional system. Do administrators and teachers get clear messages from the state about which instructional materials are most aligned with their state standards? What evidence does the state provide on that alignment? Does your state agency have regular mechanisms for providing that information not only to administrators but also to teachers? Does your state have standards for professional development and mechanisms for ensuring standards alignment and quality? How is your state incentivizing use of high-quality materials and professional development?

Much work remains to ensure that ELA teachers can deliver strong, standards-aligned instruction in their classrooms. Yet before teachers can even get to that point, they must learn what their standards say. High-quality instructional materials is one path to getting teachers better information, as well as supporting students to master state standards. Ensuring that all available messages, materials, trainings, and tools provide clear, consistent information will also equip teachers to explore and pursue standards-aligned instruction. ■

<sup>1</sup>Julia H. Kaufman et al., *Changes in What Teachers Know and Do in the Common Core Era: American Teacher Panel Findings from 2015 to 2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018); Achieve, "Strong Standards: A Review of Changes to State Standards Since the Common Core" (Washington, DC, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Douglas Fisher et al., *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2012); David Liben and Meredith Liben, "Both and? Literacy Instruction K-5: A Proposed Paradigm Shift for the Common Core State Standards ELA Classroom" (Washington, DC: Achieve the Core, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Fountas & Pinnell Literacy, "Alignment of Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and *The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum*, Expanded Edition" (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishing, 2017), [https://www.fountasandpinnell.com/shared/resources/Alignment\\_CCSS\\_ELA\\_and\\_FPLcontinuum\\_09-2017\\_web.pdf](https://www.fountasandpinnell.com/shared/resources/Alignment_CCSS_ELA_and_FPLcontinuum_09-2017_web.pdf); Renaissance Learning, "Accelerated Reader, ATOS, and the Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts" (Wisconsin Rapids, WI, 2012), [http://www.mentorschools.net/Downloads/Text\\_Complexity\\_for\\_AR.pdf](http://www.mentorschools.net/Downloads/Text_Complexity_for_AR.pdf).

net/Downloads/Text\_Complexity\_for\_AR.pdf.

<sup>5</sup>Emily Hodge and Susanna Benko, "A 'Common' Vision of Instruction? An Analysis of English/Language Arts Professional Development Materials Related to the Common Core State Standards," *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 13, no. 1 (May 2014): 169–96.

<sup>6</sup>Melanie R. Kuhn and Steven A. Stahl, "Fluency: A Review of Developmental and Remedial Practices," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95, no. 1 (2003): 3–21; Donald L. Compton et al., "Exploring the Relationship between Text-Leveling Systems and Reading Accuracy and Fluency in Second-Grade Students Who Are Average and Poor Decoders," *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* 19, no. 3 (2004): 176–84; Rollanda E. O'Connor et al., "Improvement in Reading Rate under Independent and Difficult Text Levels: Influences on Word and Comprehension Skills," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 102, no. 1 (2010): 1–19.

<sup>7</sup>Bruce Baker et al., "Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card, Sixth Edition" (Newark, NJ: Education Law Center, 2017); Diana Epstein, "Measuring Inequity in School Funding" (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, August 2011); Linda Hertert et al., "School Financing Inequities among the States: The Problem from a National Perspective," *Journal of Education Finance* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994): 231–55.

<sup>8</sup>Cynthia E. Coburn, "Collective Sensemaking about Reading: How Teachers Mediate Reading Policy in Their Professional Communities," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23, no. 2 (2001): 145–70; Cynthia E. Coburn, "Beyond Decoupling: Rethinking the Relationship between the Institutional Environment and the Classroom," *Sociology of Education* 77, no. 3 (2004): 211–44; David K. Cohen and Deborah L. Ball, "Policy and Practice: An Overview," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3 (1990): 233–39; James P. Spillane and John S. Zeuli, "Reform and Teaching: Exploring Patterns of Practice in the Context of National and State Mathematics Reforms," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 21, no. 1 (1999), 1–27.

<sup>9</sup>Julia H. Kaufman et al., "Creating a Coherent System to Support Instruction Aligned with State Standards: Promising Practices of the Louisiana Department of Education" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Stephanie Aragon, "Policy Snapshot: Teacher Development and Advancement" (Denver: Education Commission of the States, March 2018).

<sup>12</sup>National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, "State Policies to Improve Teacher Professional Development," issue brief (Washington, DC, 2009).

## How is your state incentivizing use of high-quality materials and professional development?

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*Teachers say they would benefit from a deeper grounding in writing pedagogy.*

**Gary A. Troia**

# Writing Standards: Overcoming the Implementation Challenges

Writing is a cornerstone in the K-12 experience. Students write to demonstrate, support, and deepen understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their world—and to succeed on achievement tests in all subjects. Writing proficiency sets students up for postsecondary success and workforce participation.<sup>1</sup> It facilitates their social and civic activities and can reduce psychological and physical distress.<sup>2</sup> Yet roughly three-quarters of U.S. students do not write proficiently, a finding that has persisted over two decades.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it is no surprise that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted by most states in 2010, sought to elevate the importance of writing instruction in schools and the expectations for student writing performance. But did the new standards alter the facts on the ground? Can they?

## Can Learning Standards Improve Writing?

Learning standards for writing do influence teachers' writing instruction, largely by increasing the time they spend teaching writing (which survey data suggest has historically been quite limited).<sup>4</sup> However, specific standards are open to interpretation and thus are negotiated through teachers' experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and actions.<sup>5</sup> To this point, some colleagues and I examined the impact of 26 states' writing standards (those in effect during the decade before CCSS) on eighth graders' writing performance as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.<sup>6</sup> We found that variability in state writing standards did not significantly explain variation in students' writing performance and concluded that the effects of standards on student outcomes are likely fully mediated by what happens in

the classroom, reinforcing the idea that teacher traits and actions are pivotal to student success in writing.

A series of nationally representative polls of nearly 700 teachers suggested that teacher support for the CCSS had declined precipitously, from 76 percent in 2013 to 40 percent in 2015. And of those teachers reporting that the standards were used in their district, nearly half felt the standards had a negative effect on their schools.<sup>7</sup> These same polls showed teachers were evenly divided on their support for annual accountability testing (the polls did not query teachers about their attitudes toward specific standards-aligned assessments).

Of course, teachers' perceptions are influenced by larger sociopolitical forces. Opposition to the new standards came from both the right and left sides of the political spectrum. Conservative opponents argued that the new standards represented federal intrusion on states' rights to set educational goals that best meet the needs of their citizens. Liberal opponents decried the involvement of influential nonprofit and corporate entities in the evolution, promotion, and implementation of the standards, entities they eyed with suspicion. Some of the opposition to standards may have been misplaced, reflecting concerns over new standards-aligned assessments rather than the standards themselves. Nevertheless, the political fallout was pronounced. Teachers' opposition likely reflected the negative sociopolitical climate in addition to dissatisfaction arising from their own experience. Moreover, teachers' less-than-sanguine attitudes toward the standards may have been aggravated by the contemporaneous deployment of new teacher evaluation systems that placed considerable weight on student outcomes.

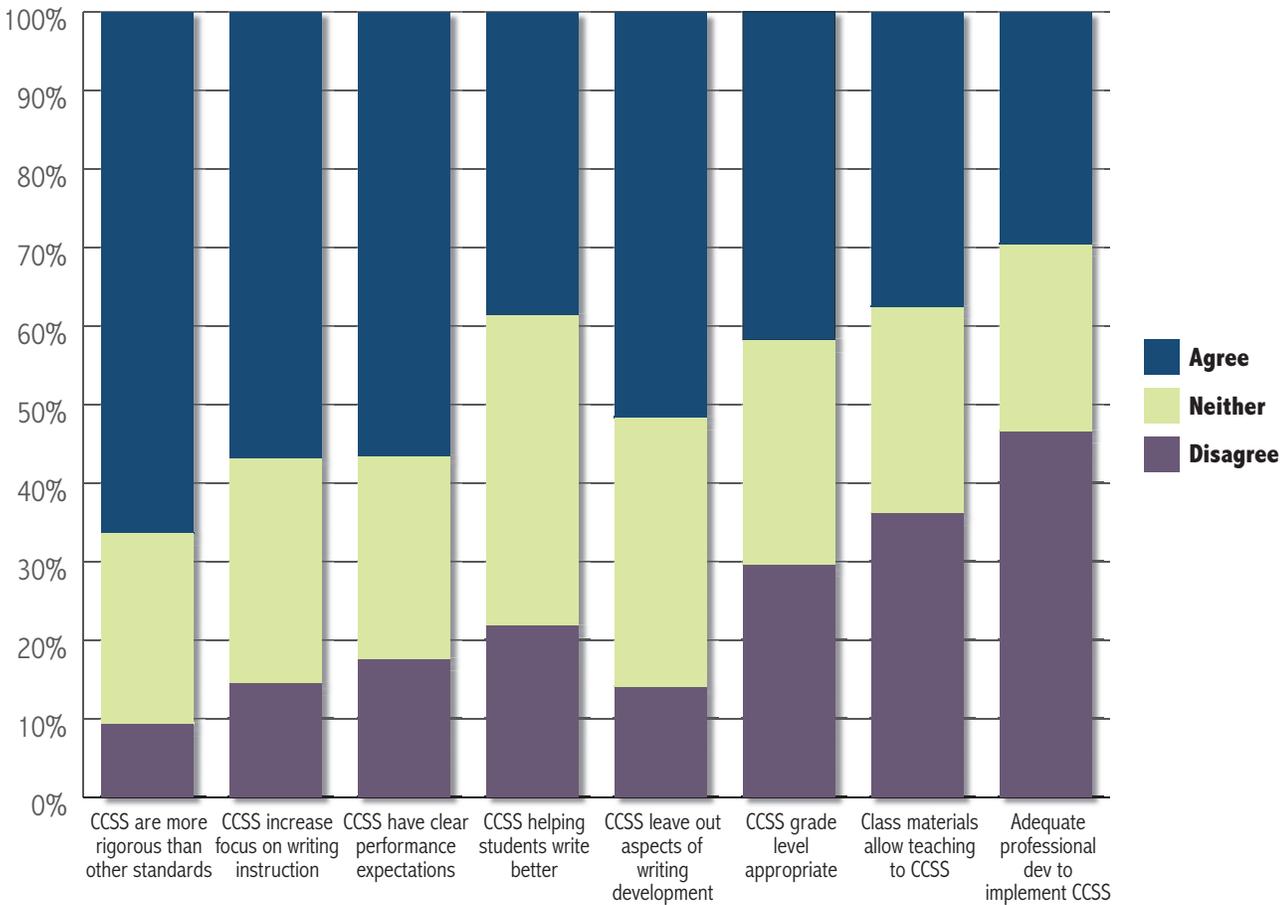
With respect to the Common Core writing and language standards specifically, a national survey of 482 grade 3 through 8 teachers that Steve Graham and I conducted in 2015 found that teachers were generally positive about the writing and language standards their state had adopted, regardless of whether teachers taught elementary or middle school (see figure 1).<sup>8</sup> They perceived the standards to be rigorous, consistent, fairly coherent, and mostly appropriate for typical students, and they believed they had adequate administrative support for implementing the standards.

However, these same teachers believed they had not received sufficient professional learning opportunities on how to implement the writing and language standards. Nearly one in five reported that they were not even very familiar with the standards, a prerequisite for

faithful implementation. Other studies that have examined teachers' views of the broader Common Core through interviews and nonrandom sample surveys have reported similar shortcomings in knowledge of the standards and related professional development.<sup>9</sup> Those teachers in the Troia-Graham survey who had more preservice coursework and had taken part in more job-embedded and independent professional learning activities that focused on effective writing instruction held stronger attitudes and beliefs about the standards (which, again, were largely positive), as did those teachers who reported more positive beliefs about their capabilities to teach writing to diverse students.

So what is to be made of the research on writing standards? Given that teachers (at least most elementary and middle school teachers) hold relatively positive beliefs and

**Figure 1. Perceptions of CCSS for Writing and Language: Teachers Familiar with CCSS**



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**Knowledge of the standards alone will be inadequate because teachers must determine how to help their diverse students attain them.**

attitudes about the Common Core writing and language standards, they are more likely than not to support implementing them, which is good news for the state policymakers who adopted them. Further, those teachers who are better prepared to teach writing and feel more confident in their abilities to teach it appear to be even more enthusiastic. And it appears that teachers may feel more positively about Common Core writing and language standards than about the CCSS in general, perhaps because they perceive writing to have been the “neglected R,” and they welcome the opportunity to address the deficiency in the classroom,<sup>10</sup> or perhaps because writing has not figured prominently in any education reform efforts and thus has been an inert aspect in the divisive political discourse around the CCSS. In any case, the standards have the potential to improve the long-standing poor writing performance of many children and adolescents in the U.S. if carefully implemented. It is this point that deserves further consideration, because as with many policy mandates, the devil is in the details, and several barriers to implementation are immediately evident.

### **Barriers to Implementing Learning Standards for Writing**

One implementation barrier for the writing and language standards is teacher knowledge—knowledge about the standards and about effective practices to help students attain the standards. As noted previously, a sizable minority of teachers have reported being unfamiliar with Common Core standards related to writing and language, even five years after the standards were adopted in their states. These teachers need ongoing opportunities to deeply examine the following:

- the content and intent of the standards and grade-to-grade progressions;
- relationships between each standard and with standards in other subject areas;
- how student attainment of the standards is evaluated through district- and state-sanctioned assessments (and teacher-developed assessments) and how such assessment data can be used to identify students’ writing strengths and needs; and

- the degree to which the standards and writing curriculum materials align and how to address misalignment when it becomes evident.

Of course, knowledge of the standards alone will be inadequate because teachers must determine how to help their diverse students attain them. It will be advantageous to increase future and practicing teachers’ knowledge about and competence in writing development, instruction, and assessment to encourage widespread embrace of the goals of the writing and language standards. Teachers who are armed with deep knowledge about writing pedagogy and who believe they are capable of executing such pedagogy in the classroom may see the standards as a pathway to attain better student writing outcomes and therefore favor their implementation. Yet professional preparation in the domain of writing has been chronically inadequate,<sup>11</sup> in part because of the reading-centric view of literacy achievement that many preparation programs have taken.

In some cases, the standards themselves point the way to specific practices teachers might adopt. For instance, the Common Core standards at most grades expect students to gather and sort information about a topic, plan how they will communicate through writing their ideas about that topic, draft a piece of writing by hand or word processor, revise and edit their paper, and collaborate with others. The standards would lead most teachers to adopt a focus on the writing process given these particular elements and thus use process-based instruction, which is a modestly effective teaching practice.

But there is not much instructional guidance in the standards themselves, and the standards weren’t designed for that purpose in any case. In fact, Natalie Olinghouse and I found that the Common Core writing and language standards signaled (that is, the language in the standards pointed teachers toward a particular practice) no more than half of 36 identified evidence-based writing instruction practices across grades K-12.<sup>12</sup> Thus educators cannot rely on the standards alone to tell them how to teach writing. Other resources—most notably focused, coherent, and sustained professional development materials and activities—must be

consulted if teachers are to be well informed about what works in the teaching of writing. Teachers armed with deep knowledge of the standards, related practices, and how specific practices support students' attainment of those standards can help more K-12 students become proficient writers.

A second challenge to successful implementation is the nature of the standards themselves. For example, my colleagues and I have found that the writing and language standards do not treat transcription skills (spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding) in a comprehensive manner to address key developmental progressions in these skills (e.g., spelling beyond grade 3 is addressed with a single, vague standard calling for students to spell grade-appropriate words correctly, and only general references to handwriting are made in kindergarten and grade 1 and to keyboarding in grades 3-6).<sup>13</sup> Sheila Carmichael and her colleagues likewise note that a number of the standards are repetitive across grades and do not clearly delineate a progression of rigor.<sup>14</sup>

It is unclear if the grade-level expectations for writing reflect the admittedly quite limited research on writing development.<sup>15</sup> If the writing standards omit content related to important developmental milestones and potentially order explicated learning demands inappropriately, these problems may indeed present serious implementation difficulties. Though teachers cannot single-handedly alter the standards, they should be made aware of their inherent limitations and the implications for addressing student needs. Most teachers are likely to have to supplement the standards with additional instructional goals for students who lie between or beyond the margins of the explicated progressions in the standards.

A third implementation barrier is the lack of curricula to guide teachers' writing instruction.<sup>16</sup> Such curricula serve as the nexus between standards and teaching: When strongly aligned with the standards, curricula can help teachers assist their students in meeting those standards in the ways intended by policymakers. Consequently, many teachers must invent a scope and sequence for the writing knowledge, skills, and strategies to be taught and must create instructional materials to be used that help students attain the standards and master writing across disciplines. Even among the small number of writing

curricula available, most do not demonstrate efficacy (i.e., proven to be efficacious in randomized controlled research trials) or, more important, effectiveness (i.e., demonstrate a measured positive impact on student writing outcomes when teachers use them).

Educators and entrepreneurs' efforts to develop and empirically validate writing curricula and instructional materials have gained some traction in recent years. For instance, a highly efficacious and effective writing strategy instruction model known as self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) has recently been commercialized by *thinkSRSD*, which provides teachers with CCSS-aligned curriculum guides, instructional lesson plans and materials, demonstration videos, and multimodal professional learning opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators has developed, piloted, revised, and deployed standards-aligned writing curricula and instructional units of study materials for use across schools in the state.

## How Can Policymakers Support Better Implementation?

Policymakers such as state boards of education can help solve these implementation challenges in two ways. First, professional standards for practice must communicate the importance of effective writing instruction to student success across subject areas. Simultaneously, teacher education and credentialing programs should be required to provide in-depth coverage of writing development, learning standards, effective writing pedagogy, research-informed assessment, appropriate accommodations and modifications for struggling writers, and alignment between these elements—in other words, much more than is typically offered in courses on literacy instruction. Second, policymakers should ensure that districts and schools have access to evidence-based instructional practices and materials that have been thoroughly vetted. One place to locate such sources is the What Works Clearinghouse (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>) sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences, which provides practice guides, intervention reports, and research study reviews.

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**Many teachers must invent a scope and sequence for writing knowledge, skills, and strategies and must create instructional materials.**

**Gary A. Troia, PhD, is an associate professor in Michigan State University's Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education.**



*Evidence-based instruction for those identified in kindergarten will alter their trajectories in school and life.*

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**Senator Bill Cassidy  
and Dr. Laura Cassidy**

## Early Screening and Intervention for Students with Dyslexia

Although it affects as many as one in five individuals in the United States and 80 percent of all children labeled as learning disabled, dyslexia remains poorly understood in educational circles.<sup>1</sup> And although it is one of the most comprehensively studied learning disabilities, dyslexia often goes unidentified. Unidentified students who do not receive evidence-based instruction struggle in school and therefore are prone to suffer from low self-esteem. The problem extends beyond school: Published data from Texas and yet-to-be published data from Louisiana strongly suggest that a large percentage of prison inmates are dyslexic.<sup>2</sup>

Given that illiteracy is a risk factor for criminal behavior and that dyslexia is overwhelmingly the most common cause of illiteracy, we advocated for dyslexia screening to be included in criminal justice reform legislation.<sup>3</sup> Senator

Cassidy requested that the First Step Act, recently signed into law by President Donald Trump, include this definition of dyslexia:

“...an unexpected difficulty in reading for an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader, most commonly caused by a difficulty in the phonological processing which is the appreciation of the individual sounds of spoken language, which affects the ability of an individual to speak, read, and spell.”

Critically, the federal definition of dyslexia as “an unexpected difficulty in reading” recognizes the central discrepancy between intelligence and reading in individuals with dyslexia (figure 1). That is, whereas reading ability and intelligence normally correlate, for those with dyslexia, they do not. The U.S. Senate recognized this paradox in 2018, when it passed a resolution stating that “an individual may

have both a weakness in decoding that results in difficulties in accurate or fluent word recognition and strengths in higher level cognitive functions, such as reasoning, critical thinking, concept formation, and problem solving.<sup>74</sup>

The First Step Act requires that inmates entering the Federal Bureau of Prisons be screened for dyslexia. Given the proclivity toward academic failure, disengagement from school, behavioral problems, and involvement in the justice system, earlier screening for dyslexia is also an urgent necessity. The next step should be for states to require schools to screen all children specifically for dyslexia when they are in kindergarten.

Academic success, high school graduation, college graduation, and meaningful employment all require strong reading and writing skills. It makes sense that efforts to reduce recidivism among inmates that are dyslexic would include identification, appropriate instruction, and accommodations that increases their chance to obtain a GED. Likewise, states' K-12 educational systems should make every effort to allow dyslexic children to reach their potential and, among other good outcomes, reduce their risk

for incarceration later in life.

It was the science supporting the clinical diagnosis of dyslexia that led Laura, a physician, and others to start a public charter school in Baton Rouge for children with dyslexia in 2013. The Louisiana Key Academy was developed to connect current science with the identification and education of children with dyslexia.

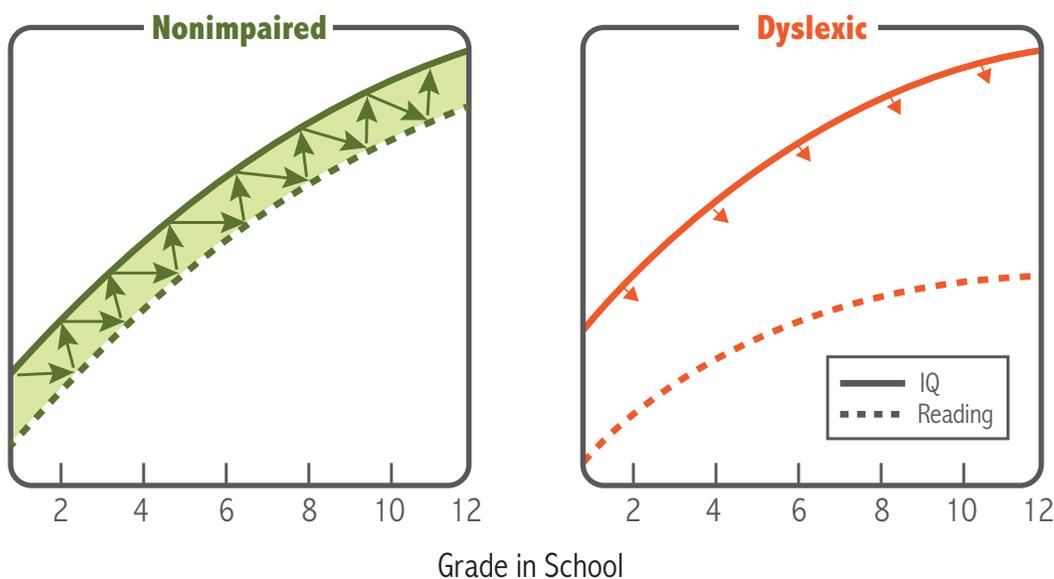
### Early Screening and Effective Interventions

In 2018, the U.S. Senate passed Senate Resolution 680 on a bipartisan basis to encourage schools, states, and districts to better address dyslexia.<sup>5</sup> The resolution states that “the achievement gap between typical readers and dyslexic readers occurs as early as first grade; and...early screening for, and early diagnosis of, dyslexia are critical for ensuring that individuals with dyslexia receive focused, evidence-based interventions that lead to fluent reading, promotion of self-awareness and self-empowerment...”

Given that the gap appears in the first grade and given dyslexia's prevalence and impact on

**Screening for dyslexia is different from screening for struggling readers.**

**Figure 1. K-12 Reading and IQ over Time in Dyslexic and Nonimpaired Readers**



Source: Adapted from Emilio Ferrer et al., “Uncoupling of Reading and IQ Over Time: Empirical Evidence for a Definition of Dyslexia,” *Psychological Science* 21 (2010): 93–101.

Note: In typical readers, arrows between IQ (upper line) and reading (lower line) illustrate that IQ and reading are dynamically linked over time. In contrast, there are no interconnecting arrows between IQ and reading for dyslexic readers, for whom IQ and reading are dissociated; one does not influence the other. The Y axis represents the level of IQ or the level of reading.

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**Because most dyslexic children are not identified as having dyslexia, school is a difficult, frustrating proposition.**

academic success, we thus advocate that schools screen for dyslexia in kindergarten. Early diagnosis is important because, in general, reading interventions delayed beyond the first grade are less likely to yield significant improvement.<sup>6</sup>

Screening for dyslexia is different from screening for struggling readers. As doctors, we use this analogy: Screening for breast cancer is different from screening for all cancer. Since there is a specific treatment for breast cancer, doctors screen specifically for breast cancer. Similarly, if screening identifies a child at risk for dyslexia, and further testing confirms it, there are specific interventions and accommodations that benefit dyslexics but not nondyslexics.

Currently, most schools are reticent to identify children as dyslexic. The systems in place today call dyslexics “struggling readers” or “learning disabled.” When children have academic difficulties, the system places the child in a multitiered system of support (MTSS), which is commonly implemented in states through response to intervention (RTI) or refers them for a special education evaluation. But if the child is not identified as dyslexic and given evidence-based interventions, valuable instructional time and taxpayer money is wasted.

Functional magnetic resonance imaging shows that dyslexics use an inefficient system of the brain and therefore read slowly and with much effort.<sup>7</sup> Thus dyslexia is lifelong, and neither teachers, curriculum, nor home environment can be blamed for the reading failure of a student with dyslexia. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data show that 32 percent of American fourth grade students read below basic level.<sup>8</sup> Some of these children come from the same educational or home environments as those reading at or above basic. This suggests that there is another factor at work.<sup>9</sup>

Convened by Congress in 1997 to assess the effectiveness of approaches to reading instruction, the National Reading Panel established an evidence-based methodology for instruction of children with dyslexia.<sup>10</sup> Children placed in groups of six or fewer should get 90 minutes daily of structured language arts that includes decoding instruction and reading text out loud. The teacher must understand the core deficit of dyslexia and use a curriculum that builds upon the spoken word and alphabet recognition along

with reading out loud. Since all subjects include spoken and written words, dyslexics also need math, social studies, and science delivered in a way that they can understand.

The dyslexic student needs instruction specific for a dyslexic. General instruction for a small group of those tagged with “learning disabilities”—perhaps also including children with autism and Down syndrome—may check a box but fail to be appropriate for anyone. Because most dyslexic children are not identified as having dyslexia, school is a difficult, frustrating proposition that limits their potential. The child with dyslexia that is not identified and has no outside resources will most likely exhibit poor academic achievement compared with nondyslexics, diminished self-esteem, a reduced chance of high school and college graduation, and perhaps an increased risk of incarceration.

For this reason, Senate Resolution 680 called for action: “Resolved, That the Senate- (1) calls on Congress, schools, and State and local educational agencies to recognize that dyslexia has significant educational implications that must be addressed...”

## Targeted Instruction in Louisiana

The best model for public schools serving students with dyslexia uses the principles of the National Reading Panel and current science, and it diverges from common practice. Some doubt that public schools can follow the guidelines of the National Reading Panel. They can.

As proof of concept, Louisiana Key Academy (LKA) is a public charter school focused and dedicated to educating dyslexics in first through eighth grade. LKA was developed to preserve children’s self-esteem and narrow the achievement gap with nondyslexics. LKA only accepts children with characteristics of dyslexia, and it is a replicable model for educating these children using public dollars while delivering an excellent, science-based education.

Most children enter LKA in the third grade or later. At enrollment, students cannot read at grade level. All but a few of the 202 current students who were tested upon initial enrollment in first through fifth grades could not identify, sequence, and/or form all letters. That is, almost all the students entering those grades at LKA did not have skills a first grade student should have for reading. Two-thirds of current

## Kansas Task Force Makes Dyslexia Recommendations

In 2018, the Kansas legislature created a task force on dyslexia to study research and deliver recommendations for amending the state's dyslexia-related education policies. Led by Kansas State Board of Education member Jim Porter, the task force split its work into four subcommittees that focused on current state and federal law, evidence-based reading practices, preservice and in-service professional development for educators, and screening and evaluation processes.

House Bill 2602 stipulated that the task force's 16 voting members represent specific groups: the House and Senate, elementary school teachers, the Kansas State Board of Education, parents of children with dyslexia, and public universities. Porter noted that several people were not represented, so he invited others to join as "consulting conferees," or nonvoting members. These included a representative from the Kansas National Education Association, a retired special education administrator, and an assistant superintendent from a moderate-sized school district. They added considerable value to the task force's work, Porter said.

The task force met five times to hear subcommittee findings and debate their work. "You have people in the room who have been fighting each other for years," Porter said. Yet each member ultimately agreed on a core idea, Porter said: that the sizable contingent of Kansas students whom teachers report as facing difficulty with reading deserve a quality education.

The task force made its final report to the legislature and the state board of education in February 2019. Their recommendations include school-level screenings but go further. The task force suggests that the state board and legislature modify educator preparation program standards, require an examination on the science of reading, and provide funding to train education professors; build upon professional learning opportunities and dyslexia-specific courses of study; and establish coherent structured literacy programs, a dyslexia handbook, a department coordinator, and an official definition of dyslexia.

The report concludes by recommending the legislature reappoint the task force—with the same members and consulting conferees—so it can monitor and report on progress. Given the good rapport between the task force and legislature, Porter sees this step toward accountability as likely. "It is my hope," he said, "that we should have reports from these groups by the summer and begin implementing by next year."

— *Joseph Hedger*

a. 2018 Legislative Task Force on Dyslexia, "Report of the Legislative Task Force on Dyslexia to the 2019 Kansas Legislature" (2019), [http://www.kslegresearch.org/KLRD-web/Publications/CommitteeReports/2018CommitteeReports/legis\\_tf\\_dyslexia-cr.pdf](http://www.kslegresearch.org/KLRD-web/Publications/CommitteeReports/2018CommitteeReports/legis_tf_dyslexia-cr.pdf).

students had failed a core academic class, were recommended for retention, or were held back for at least one grade before attending LKA.

As part of an evaluation for dyslexia, students' decoding ability is assessed. Dyslexics have difficulty in pulling apart a word into phonemes, which are the smallest unit of the spoken word. For example, "cat" has three phonemes. The phonemic deficit in dyslexia is addressed as LKA

teaches decoding skills. Level literature read out loud and vocabulary are a part of the curriculum as well. Academic content knowledge is delivered in a format in which children can learn the material, in contrast to a traditional approach that bases instruction on textbooks they cannot read.

The Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP) measures the phonemic deficit.<sup>11</sup> Of all students entering LKA, 71

percent scored in the poor or below-average range of the test, which indicates they lack the basic skills necessary to read. Other tests measuring decoding skills yielded equivalent findings. After instruction at LKA, 92 percent of students either increased their CTOPP score or maintained an average or higher score. More than 90 percent increased reading accuracy. The goal is for the children to read as fluently as possible, which depends on grade of entry and the severity of a student's dyslexia.

Teachers at LKA have a comprehensive understanding of dyslexia that allows them to integrate decoding instruction and use level literature simultaneously. They understand, for example, how dyslexia may be presented in a struggling reader but that there are often difficulties with spelling, math, writing, and word retrieval. LKA teachers help children become better readers, writers, and mathematicians.

The teachers at LKA also realize that standardized tests do not accurately assess what students with dyslexia know or how much their fluency has improved over time. Even though the Every Student Succeeds Act still requires such tests as part of a state's accountability measures and does not allow for providing assessments tailored for dyslexic students, LKA teachers look at metrics specific to dyslexia to assess academic student growth and understanding of academic content. Serious discussions at LKA occur about teaching to the yearly high-stakes standardized test versus spending the time to teach a dyslexic to read, write, and understand math. The standardized tests are multiple choice and language heavy, which can be incredibly difficult for the student with dyslexia, who otherwise may be very intelligent. Failing scores on the tests feed the mistaken notion that these students and their teachers are incompetent or not trying hard enough.

A state or local educational system that groups all children into one classroom with one curriculum and framework is not realistic. Accountability in these systems should build on current science and reliable data. States and districts should use measures that gauge students' progress in decoding and improvement in reading fluency, which are necessary for comprehension. Such an approach would recognize that students who are working exceptionally hard to decode written text will struggle with comprehension and accuracy when they

are faced with myriad multiple-choice questions.

LKA is a replicable model for producing confident students who perform to the best of their ability. Having teachers who understand the paradox of intelligent students who struggle academically is key. When a student with dyslexia does not progress in a subject as expected or fails a standardized test, teachers with this understanding will change the way material is delivered rather than doubling down on go-to reading comprehension strategies or dismissing the student as lazy or unintelligent. With instruction based on current science, LKA has created a learning environment in which students with dyslexia enjoy school with their self-esteem intact while progressing academically, regardless of family income. Society will reap the added benefit of reducing the risk of crime and incarceration for students who may otherwise have lost hope for a better future. ■

<sup>1</sup>Emilio Ferrer et al., "Uncoupling of Reading and IQ Over Time: Empirical Evidence for a Definition of Dyslexia," *Psychological Science* 21 (2010): 93–101; Bennett Shaywitz et al., "Issues in the Definition and Classification of Attention Disorder," *Top Language Disorders* 14 (1994): 1–25; Janet Lerner, "Educational Interventions in Learning Disabilities," *Journal of American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry* 28 (1989): 326–31.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Moody et al., "Prevalence of Dyslexia among Texas Prison Inmates," *The Journal of Texas Medicine* 96, no. 6 (2000): 69–75.

<sup>3</sup>See Sen. Bill Cassidy and Laura Cassidy, M.D., "Addressing Dyslexia Is Key to Reducing Criminal Recidivism," *The Hill* (December 19, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>A Resolution Calling on Congress, Schools, and State and Local Educational Agencies to Recognize the Significant Educational Implications of Dyslexia That Must Be Addressed and Designating October 2018 as "National Dyslexia Awareness Month," S Res 680, 115 Cong, 2018.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Emilio Ferrer et al., "Achievement Gap in Reading Is Present as Early as First Grade and Persists through Adolescence," *Journal of Pediatrics* 167, no. 5 (2015): 1121–25.

<sup>7</sup>Bennett Shaywitz et al., "Disruption of Posterior Brain Systems for Reading in Children with Developmental Dyslexia," *Biological Psychiatry* 52 (2002): 101–10.

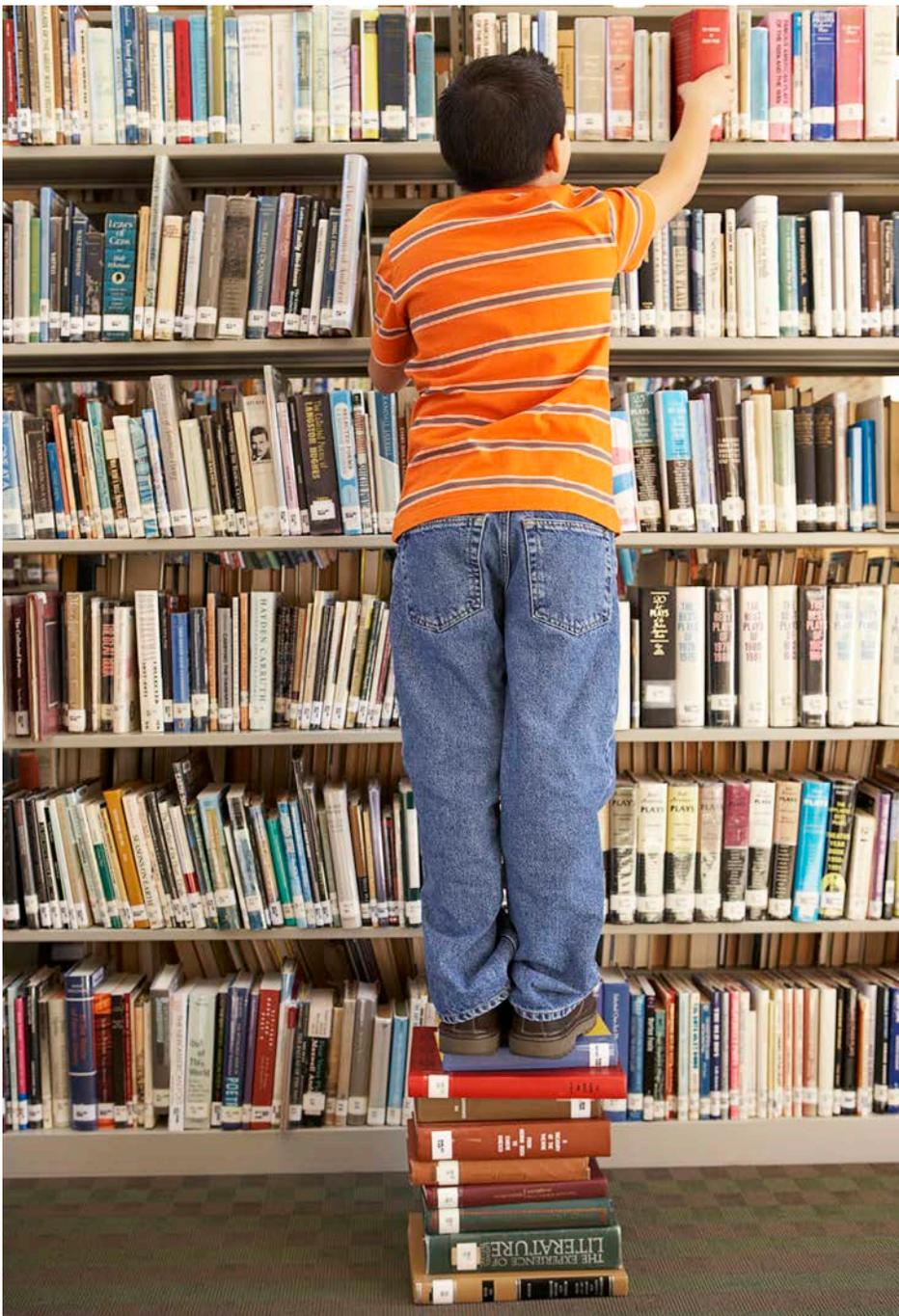
<sup>8</sup>Joel McFarland et al., "The Condition of Education" (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), 96.

<sup>9</sup>R.K. Olsen, "Genes, Environment and Reading Disabilities," in R.J. Sternberg and L. Spear-Swerlings, eds., *Perspectives on Learning Disabilities* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, "Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction," Reports of the Subgroups (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).

<sup>11</sup>CTOPP is an oral test. For example, a student might be asked, "Say doughnut. Now, say doughnut without 'dough.'"

**U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D., (R-LA) was elected to the Senate in 2014, and Laura Cassidy, M.D., is co-founder and chair of Louisiana Key Academy (LKA).**



# Policies That Support Improving the Literacy Levels of English Learners

Literacy is increasingly essential for Americans' health, economic well-being, civic engagement, access to higher education, and social participation. Rapid growth in technology and globalization

have increased demand for both universal literacy and higher levels of literacy than in the recent past.

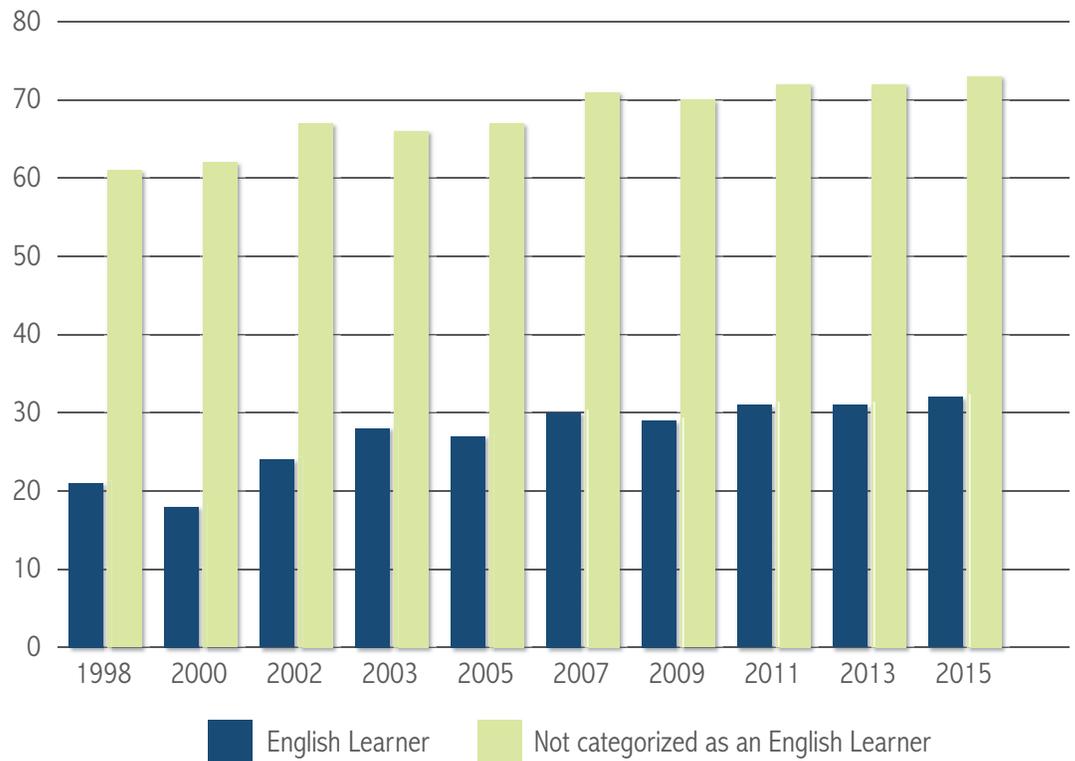
Yet national and international assessments indicate that America's children

*They need both explicit teaching in academic language and full academic participation to help them catch up.*

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**Timothy Shanahan  
and Jana Echevarria**

**Figure 1. Fourth-Grade Reading Achievement on NAEP at Basic Level, 1998-2017**



are not meeting these demands. According to the Programme for International Student Achievement, children in the United States significantly underperform those in Canada, Germany, Japan, and 11 other countries.<sup>1</sup> And according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), U.S. reading levels have languished for 12 years—with no improvements at any grade level.<sup>2</sup>

The story is even worse if we look at the nearly five million English learners (ELs) in U.S. schools who are learning rigorous content while learning English, the language of instruction.<sup>3</sup> At fourth grade, 72 percent of native English speakers reached at least the basic level on the NAEP assessment, but only 31 percent of the ELs did, and results are similar in grade 8. These disappointing achievement patterns have persisted since 2000 (figure 1). These data also vary quite a bit by state (table 1, pg 36), which underscores the possibilities for offering better supports for these students.

The vast majority of English learners are U.S. citizens, and their educations are as vital to the future security and welfare of the country as those of any other American students. It may be more challenging to teach ELs to read in English, and yet these children need literacy as much as native English speakers. And making up nearly 10 percent of school enrollment, they have a significant impact on overall achievement.

If schools are to be successful, they must ensure that ELs attain high levels of literacy. To accomplish this, state boards of education must adopt policies and practices based upon the best evidence. That evidence points to seven actions that boards should consider if they hope to raise literacy achievement among English learners.

**1. Establish a policy to promote daily, systematic English language instruction.** Academic success generally depends upon students'

English proficiency. Adeptness with oral English is implicated in students' progress in reading comprehension and writing.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, researchers Claude Goldenberg and Rhoda Coleman conclude, "developing high levels of English oral language proficiency should be a priority for teachers of English learners."<sup>5</sup>

Often teachers assume that EL students who can communicate fairly well in informal conversations in English are sufficiently proficient. However, conversational English is not enough for academic success. Academic English is more formal, and it requires an understanding of discipline-specific vocabulary and grammar, rhetorical conventions, and academic explanations and argument. Basically, academic language enables students to make a more thorough or denser presentation of ideas, with more explicit connections, than is common in conversational English.

Just as it is impossible to determine someone's English proficiency from informal conversation alone, informal interactions will not prepare EL students for rigorous academic demands. However, effective second-language instruction can provide students with explicit teaching in English while also giving them opportunities to use the second language.<sup>6</sup>

Explicit teaching of English encompasses the teaching of vocabulary, syntax, and language conventions, along with strategies in how to learn language such as note taking or summarizing. Such instruction has been most successful when provided daily in a separate time block dedicated to English instruction. Education policies often seem to be based upon the assumption that English learners can develop a sufficient command of English by participating in the same instructional programs as their English-speaking peers. It would be more effective to require the delivery of a period of explicit English instruction for these students—while still including them in the academic instruction provided to their classmates.

A two-pronged approach—explicit teaching and full academic participation—requires that EL students also be included in meaningful classroom tasks that allow them to interact with English-speaking students. Taking part in group problem solving, discussions, debates, shared lab and art activities, and so on gives students

the opportunity to apply their growing English proficiency and to fully master English.

Policies and resources should be aligned to support such a two-pronged approach, as it is the surest way to success. California adopted a curriculum framework that ensures this two-pronged approach. The state requires a minimum of 30 minutes of daily English language development for English learners along with suggested teaching strategies for providing meaningful participation in general education literacy lessons.

**2. Support explicit instruction in key literacy components.** In the 1990s, the U.S. Congress asked that a group of researchers determine how reading ought to be taught. The National Reading Panel reviewed hundreds of studies on the teaching of reading to native English speakers. It concluded that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension provided the surest progress toward high reading achievement.<sup>7</sup>

Observers often assume that the needs of English learners must be quite different, so the focus on reading instruction should be different. But why would English reading be any different for a student with a different first language? Students still must be able to translate print to oral language and to interpret authors' messages. Explicit teaching in how to do those things could be beneficial to both native and second language learners.

Studies on the teaching of English reading to ELs help us to sort out such matters. The largest review of such studies concluded that, indeed, teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension were all beneficial to ELs.<sup>8</sup> However, that same review found that the learning payoff of such teaching for ELs, though positive, was smaller overall.

The reason for this difference is that such teaching depends upon students' English proficiency. Students may use phonics to translate printed words to pronunciations, but those pronunciations are more likely to be linked to something meaningful for native speakers. Phonics only can help ELs to the extent that pronunciations lead to meaning. Thus vocabulary instruction has the opposite pattern:

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**Low expectations for ELs are as unwarranted as they are damaging.**

**Table 1. NAEP Achievement Level for Grade 4 Reading, by State and EL Status, 2017 (percentage)**

State	English Learner		Not EL	
	Basic & above	Proficient or above	Basic & above	Proficient & above
<b>National</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>40</b>
DoDEA	63	22	86	51
Ohio	60	24	72	39
Kansas	54	20	73	40
New Hampshire	53	25	76	44
Arkansas	44	14	65	33
Indiana	42	16	74	42
South Carolina	42	15	60	31
Massachusetts	42	14	84	54
Missouri	41	16	70	37
Texas	37	12	68	34
Delaware	37	11	70	38
Connecticut	35	10	77	45
Wisconsin	35	9	69	37
Michigan	35	12	67	34
Louisiana	33	9	57	27
Colorado	33	8	77	45
Georgia	32	10	68	36
Maryland	32	9	73	44
Florida	31	7	78	44
California	31	8	72	39
Virginia	31	8	78	46
Nebraska	30	8	76	41
Oklahoma	28	5	67	31
Illinois	27	6	70	39
Iowa	27	5	71	38
New York	26	5	72	39
Kentucky	25	5	71	39
Maine	25	9	69	37
Minnesota	24	5	76	42
Washington	22	4	75	44
Oregon	22	4	71	39
New Jersey	22	6	79	50
Montana	22	7	71	39
Tennessee	21	4	67	35
Utah	21	6	77	44
Rhode Island	20	4	73	42
Nevada	20	3	70	36
North Carolina	19	3	72	40
Wyoming	19	2	76	42
Pennsylvania	18	5	74	42
Idaho	15	3	73	40
New Mexico	14	3	62	29
Arizona	14	2	66	34
District of Columbia	12	1	60	31
Alaska	12	2	64	32
Hawaii	11	2	66	34
Alabama	†	†	65	32
Mississippi	†	†	61	28
North Dakota	†	†	71	35
South Dakota	†	†	70	37
Vermont	†	†	73	44
West Virginia	†	†	64	32

† Reporting standards not met.

◀ DoDEA = Department of Defense Education Activity. Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2017 Reading Assessment.

Vocabulary instruction helps all students, but especially English learners.

State boards would be wise to ensure that all students—including English learners—receive explicit, intentional teaching in these essential reading skills, as Colorado’s state board did. Their recently adopted comprehensive reading program requires schools to address all of the essential components of reading. More recent research would argue for adding writing to this list of “must-teach” literacy elements, since the teaching of writing has been found to improve reading skills, too.<sup>9</sup> But for English learners, the key is making skills instruction understandable and meaningful by using teaching strategies that have been found to be specifically effective for them.<sup>10</sup>

**3. Respect English learners and their home languages, and foster high expectations for EL students’ learning.** Research over the past few decades has implicated teacher expectations in student learning.<sup>11</sup> If teachers believe that their students are unlikely to learn, they tend to teach in ways that make this expectation a reality—the so-called Pygmalion effect. Many things can spur low expectations: race, ethnicity, language, family income level, and indicators of past academic performance.

The practices that emerge from these expectations are equally varied.<sup>12</sup> Teachers with low expectations for students give them less feedback and explanation when they err, provide less positive feedback when they succeed, spend less time responding to their questions, and give them fewer learning opportunities.

Complicating the issue are some teachers’ attitudes toward students’ home languages. Rather than recognizing second languages as an asset, some teachers still think they should discourage students’ use of the home language, with the idea that this would help them progress faster in English (a prejudice in deep disagreement with research). Instead of making students feel

safe and welcome, such teachers inadvertently discourage their English learners.<sup>13</sup>

Objective measures, like nonverbal intelligence quotients and incidence of learning disabilities suggest that English learners as a population are not different from native speakers.<sup>14</sup> English learners are every bit as capable of learning as native speakers, so low expectations for ELs are as unwarranted as they are damaging, and negative attitudes toward languages other than English are more likely to interfere with student learning than to increase it.

There are two reasons that EL students so often lag in reading. First, ELs must learn much more than their native-speaking classmates. They have to master the content of school subjects and English at the same time. Naturally, there will be gaps in comprehension of subject matter while they are learning English. Second, schools are often ill equipped to adequately support English learners. Teachers may have little knowledge, preparation, or sensitivity for teaching ELs, and their students therefore are deprived of the benefit of teaching practices found to facilitate comprehension and the mastery of English.<sup>15</sup>

Through their public statements, actions, and policies, state boards can encourage faculties and administrators to display positive attitudes and high expectations for the ongoing, long-term success of the English learners in their states. One tangible way to communicate high expectations and respect for multilingualism is approving a seal of biliteracy. Adopted by more than 30 states, the seal is an award given in recognition of students who have attained proficiency in two or more languages before high school graduation. At the district level, state boards can encourage professional development efforts that provide teachers with an understanding of language acquisition, the cultural and linguistic assets EL students bring, and effective instructional approaches for EL students.

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**State boards are in a great position to encourage local districts to implement family inclusion efforts.**

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**It matters whether children are lagging because of failures in their teaching or their lack of English.**

**4. Encourage the development of positive and supportive relationships with families.** As with other children, the parents and families of English learners have a strong impact on their children's academic success. Unfortunately, teachers sometimes underestimate the interest and commitments that these parents have for their children's education and consequently fail to take advantage of this valuable resource or even to keep EL parents in the loop. Yet the parents of English learners can, will, and do help their children with school, especially when they are aware of problems that their children may be having. When schools send home instructional activities focused on early literacy, the parents of English learners complete this work with their children.<sup>16</sup>

The amounts of reading and other literacy work in a home language also influences children's reading progress in English.<sup>17</sup> Parents should be encouraged to read to their children, to encourage their children to read books at home, and to discuss with their children what they are reading, and these activities should take place in whatever language they are comfortable with. For example, children may read a book in English but talk to a parent about it in Spanish.

If parents are to fully support their children's education, they need to feel welcome at their kids' schools and be included in school meetings and events. Sending invitations to parent nights and other meetings in the family's language shows that their language is respected and that they are part of a family-school partnership. Other school information should be provided in the parents' language as well. Similarly, teachers may use interpreters, as needed, to help with ongoing communication with parents about their children's progress. However, school staff should be trained in how to work with interpreters so that home-school communication is positive and effective. (The children themselves should not be placed in the role of interpreter between parents and teachers.)

Many states, including Minnesota, Wyoming, Louisiana, and New York, offer an English learner parent handbook that invites parent involvement and provides an orientation to policies and practices in schools. Although state boards (and even local school boards) do not usually communicate with parents directly

about their individual children, they can set policies that encourage family involvement by, for example, requiring that forms and notices be translated into students' home languages and providing interpreters for meetings. State boards are in a great position to encourage local districts to implement family inclusion efforts, and doing so can pay off in better state literacy achievement.

**5. Ensure that high-quality professional development is provided for teachers.** Let's face it. If districts are to foster high levels of literacy among English learners, then they need to equip their teachers (and principals) to deliver. School boards need to make sure that the hiring and professional development policies in their districts make that possible.

Professional staff attitudes and practices underpin quality instruction, high expectations, and positive home-school relations. Fortunately, professional development can enhance attitudes toward English learners and improve instructional effectiveness.<sup>18</sup>

To be effective, professional development must be ongoing; one-shot training typically fails to change attitudes or practices. Effective training also tends to integrate theory and research with demonstrations of specific teaching practices; provides time for practice, feedback, and coaching; and includes administrators and supervisory personnel so that they have a clear idea of what teachers are trying to accomplish.<sup>19</sup> Sufficient budgets must be available to support such training, and contractual arrangements should allow teachers and principals to participate.

Members of state boards of education need to be aware of the wide range of effective professional development approaches various states are taking with regard to their policy involvement in preservice education, induction, mentoring, ongoing professional development, and teacher education.<sup>20</sup> While about half of states do not require professional development for teachers of English learners, states such as Texas, Virginia, and New Mexico mandate ongoing training. For instance, Texas requires that up to 25 percent of a teacher's license-renewal professional development include instruction about educating diverse student populations, including students of limited English proficiency. These policy

options provide a sound path for improving the literacy achievement of EL students.

**6. Encourage appropriate assessments and their appropriate use.** Education policymakers need to consider the specific reasons for assessment. If a test is aimed at evaluating students' knowledge of content or their literacy, then adaptations may be needed to ensure that the tests evaluate attainment of these goals rather than simply measuring students' English proficiency. Language interference can be mitigated by reducing the number or difficulty of items or by providing support (e.g., reading instructions aloud to the students, translating instructions, orally explaining the task). If EL students cannot understand the instructions for a test, then the results of even a good test are unlikely to be valid.

Teachers should frequently use informal classroom assessments such as skills checklists, exit tickets (end-of-lesson response cards), observations, and participation rubrics to gauge EL students' understanding of the material and progress in English language development. Examining student work yields valuable data about where additional teaching is necessary. After all, the point of assessments is to inform and guide teaching. Professional education efforts in the states should ensure that teachers of English learners know enough to collect and use such data appropriately.

Annual English proficiency assessment data are typically used to determine EL status and services, but the results are most useful, especially for long-term ELs, when evaluated in a meaningful way; these scores should be used diagnostically. For instance, if an EL student meets proficiency in other domains but not in writing, then writing goals should be set—alongside the student and shared with parents to get their buy-in—and instruction should be provided to address those goals.

State boards should monitor their state's assessment policies to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to reduce the chances of language interference so that accountability measures provide them with accurate information. It matters whether children are lagging because of failures in their teaching or their lack of English. There are many accommodations that help ensure accuracy of testing. However,

state policy is needed to guarantee their use. Accommodations for English learners vary greatly by state, and there is no set of common standards across states as to what accommodations are permitted for English learners.<sup>21</sup>

State boards should also carefully monitor the results of state reading assessments and English proficiency assessments to guide their literacy education policies for this group, ensuring that districts have the appropriate resources and guidance to ensure eventual success.

**7. Provide appropriate instructional interventions in reading.** Increasingly, school districts are trying to meet the needs of students who may be struggling academically with “response to intervention” or multitiered response systems. The idea of these efforts is to monitor students' progress closely and to both enhance basic classroom instruction and provide additional targeted interventions (usually labeled as tier 2 interventions) aimed at giving additional assistance to the strugglers with the lagging skills. For instance, beginning readers often struggle with decoding, so a tier 2 intervention might offer additional phonics (or phonemic awareness or fluency) lessons for such students.

English learners may manifest decoding problems too, so decoding-oriented interventions make a lot of sense, especially in the early grades. However, many ELs (and other children, too) have sufficient decoding skills but really need high-quality language and literacy instruction in the regular classroom and in any interventions deemed necessary.

Schools should provide both decoding- and language-oriented interventions to address the needs of all their students. However, when disproportionate numbers of ELs are identified as needing interventions, resources would be better directed toward improving professional development for staff on effective classroom literacy instruction for English learners.

State boards should monitor the identification rates of ELs to ensure that these students are neither being sent to such interventions or special education solely because of their lack of English proficiency, nor should such supports be withheld from these students for that reason. State boards should monitor the tier 2 program offerings in their states to ensure that these response-to-intervention efforts can meet the needs of all

students. Many states, such as North Carolina, Illinois, and California, have processes in place to avoid over- or underidentification of English learners for interventions or special education services, and they have published them online. It is the responsibility of state boards to monitor their state's identification rates of English learners to ensure that they are appropriate.

## Final Word

State boards are responsible for ensuring all students' academic success. They meet this responsibility through their adoption of sound educational policies. If English learners are to achieve academic success, state boards need to ensure that districts are providing systematic English instruction, explicit teaching in literacy, high-quality professional development for teachers, appropriate assessments and interventions, and, by fostering respect for English learners, setting high expectations for their learning and supporting positive relations with their families. ■

<sup>1</sup>Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *PISA 2015 Results (vol. I): Excellence and Equity in Education* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2016). Some of these countries also have large populations with different language backgrounds, with even higher percentages than in the United States—Germany and Canada, for example—and indeed, they are managing to bring their immigrant populations along more effectively. See, e.g., Elisabeth Smick, “Canada's Immigration Policy” (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, July 6, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, “National Assessment of Educational Progress: The Nation's Report Card” (Washington, DC: NCES, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>David Murphey, “The Academic Achievement of English Language Learners: Data for the U.S. and Each State” (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2014).

<sup>4</sup>Esther Geva, “Second-Language Oral Proficiency and Second-Language Literacy,” in Diane August and Timothy Shanahan, eds., *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008), 123–40.

<sup>5</sup>Claude Goldenberg and Rhoda Coleman, *Promoting Academic Achievement among English Learners: A Guide to the Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2010), p. 59.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 59–80.

<sup>7</sup>National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, “Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Reports of the Subgroups” (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).

<sup>8</sup>Timothy Shanahan and Isabel L. Beck, “Effective Literacy Teaching for English-Language Learners,” in August and Shanahan, eds., *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners*, 415–88.

<sup>9</sup>Steve Graham and Michael Hebert, “Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading” (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2010).

<sup>10</sup>Deborah J. Short et al., “Research on Academic Literacy Development in Sheltered Instruction Classrooms,” *Language Teaching Research* 15, no. 3 (2011): 363–80.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development* (Bancyfelin, Camarthen, Wales: Crown House Publishers, 2003).

<sup>12</sup>Emily Workman, “Teacher Expectations for Students,” *Education Reform* 13, no. 6 (2012).

<sup>13</sup>Claude Goldenberg et al., “Sociocultural Influences on the Literacy Attainment of Language-Minority Children and Youth,” in August and Shanahan, *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners*, 269–318; Anne Walker et al., “‘Not in My Classroom’: Teacher Attitudes towards English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom,” *NABE Journal of Research and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2004): 130–60.

<sup>14</sup>Candace Cortiella and Sheldon H. Horowitz, “The State of Learning Disabilities: Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues” (New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014); Kara M. Styck and Marley W. Watkins, “Diagnostic Utility of the Culture-Language Interpretive Matrix for the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children—Fourth Edition among Referred Students,” *School Psychology Review* 42, no. 4 (2013): 367–82.

<sup>15</sup>Jana Echevarria et al., *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2017).

<sup>16</sup>Goldenberg et al., “Sociocultural Influences.”

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Goldenberg and Coleman, *Promoting Academic Achievement*, 108–11; Ellen McIntyre et al., “Teacher Learning Development,” *Literacy Research and Instruction* 49, no. 4 (2010): 334–51; Kim Hyunsook Song, “Systematic Professional Development Training and Its Impact on Teachers' Attitudes toward ELLs: SIOP and Guided Coaching,” *TESOL Journal* 7, no. 4 (2016): 767–99.

<sup>19</sup>Diane August and Margarita Calderón, “Teacher Beliefs and Professional Development,” in August and Shanahan, eds., *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners*, 555–63.

<sup>20</sup>Susanna Loeb et al., “The State Role of Teacher Professional Development and Education throughout Teachers' Careers,” *Education Finance & Policy* 4, no. 2 (2009): 212–28.

<sup>21</sup>John W. Young and Teresa C. King, “Testing Accommodations for English Language Learners: A Review of State and District Policies” (New York: The College Board, 2008).

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# The NASBE Interview

*Meredith and David Liben are literacy researchers, educators, authors, and curriculum designers. Together, they founded two innovative schools in New York City: New York Prep, a junior high school in East Harlem, and the Family Academy. NASBE President and CEO Robert Hull interviewed them in March.*



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## You've been working in education for decades and can bring a historical perspective to this question: Have we moved the needle on literacy?

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**Meredith:** Yes and no. I'll give you my yes: We have moved the needle on text complexity. Text complexity has stayed a component of all the college and career readiness standards in each of the states—the ones that are still calling themselves Common Core and the many that are not, even when they have done a total rewrite of their content. I remember saying in 2010, after the Common Core was first ratified in 46 states, that insisting on text complexity was going to pull the curtain back on problems with reading that had never gone away. If kids can't decode and if they don't have the vocabulary and reading fluency they need—which many don't—they are going to have a tough time accessing grade-level texts. So a spotlight is getting shone on these problems. It's affecting all classes of Americans now because a significant number of middle- and upper-class children are also failing to read well. Emily Hanford has written quite a few pieces for American Public Radio that have gotten wide audience around students with reading deficits who were failing to thrive in a “balanced literacy” classroom, which is the norm.

**David:** Have we moved the needle? More complex texts are being put before more students than were before the standards. Probably an even larger effect is that more students are reading nonfiction than used to be. Before, you could easily go through K-5 without ever, as part of your instruction, reading nonfiction. That is almost impossible now. More complex text—that's movement of the needle. More nonfiction—that's movement of the needle. But if you can't read the text, the needle hasn't moved for you. If we ask whether there are more kids now who can read text that is the right level of complexity and richness so that they can move on to college, we haven't moved the needle at all. The data are overwhelmingly clear about that.

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## How do we make sure trailing readers can access those complex texts?

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**Meredith:** Balanced literacy, leveled readers, and the idea of matching children to texts at their current level of reading ability mean that many kids get pigeonholed into low levels. The research base is crystal clear that kids who need to be accelerated are not—they're flat lining with lower level texts. If teachers are not giving them access to grade-level texts, they are not at all meeting college- and career-ready standards. I was on a call with a national assessment company yesterday—we were talking about our Academic Wordfinder Tool—and they kept confusing what resided in the child with what resided in the text. I said, “Understand that it's measuring the text, not whether kids can access it at that grade level.” We need to keep straight that “grade-level text”

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**The research base is crystal clear that kids who need to be accelerated are not—they're flat lining with lower level texts.**

## Glossary of Literacy Terms

**Balanced literacy.** An approach to literacy instruction wherein teachers integrate reading and writing so that students learn how to use literacy strategies and skills and have opportunities to apply what they are learning. Texts are usually leveled readers or trade literature. Components include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and reading comprehension. Although phonics is included, it rarely follows a systematic sequence, as recommended by the National Reading Panel; in most cases, it is “dropped in” as needed.

**Basal readers.** Textbooks used to teach reading—typically a single-volume anthology with textbook-driven lessons. In middle and high school, these are sometimes referred to as anthologies. In both cases, these include all English language arts elements: reading, writing, language, vocabulary, and grammar.

**Chunking.** Breaking a text into component parts or segments. Sometimes used to help students reading below grade level to read grade-level text.

**Grade-level complex texts.** Texts that are determined by quantitative methods (usually Lexiles) and qualitative analysis to be appropriately complex for a given grade. Text complexity determined in this manner increases with each grade so that students by the end of grade 12 are reading texts with comparable complexity to those used in college and careers. Text complexity is intrinsic to the text and does not take student reading levels into account. (Text difficulty, an interaction between the text and the reader, is not the same as text complexity).

**Decoding.** Sounding out words and blending sounds together to read words.

**Fluency.** Ability to read texts at grade-level complexity with speed, accuracy, and expression appropriate for the text.

**Leveled readers.** Texts determined qualitatively, and in some cases quantitatively, to be appropriate for a given grade level. Unlike grade-level texts, leveled texts are not designed to increase over the K-12 grade span so that students reach college and career levels by the end of grade 12 and usually only relate to K-8 grades. In leveled reading programs, students are assessed to determine their grade level and read only or primarily text at their assessed level.

**Scaffolds.** Literacy supports designed to enable students reading below grade level to read texts at grade levels of complexity. Examples include reading aloud while students follow along in the text, chunking text, providing vocabulary in advance, and multiple reads of the same text for different purposes.

is an absolute; it's very stern. Children getting access to it is the work—the noble and challenging work—in education right now. That doesn't mean only a few of your college-bound kids get that access and the rest are swimming in shallow water somewhere because you haven't even taught them how to do the breast stroke. Our work is giving kids tools—whether it's chunking questions, chunking the text itself, reading it aloud, building fluency, or whatever is blocking kids from getting that access. That is the work of teaching: to provide ladders, scaffolds, tools, but always providing access to grade-level texts. There are lots of ways to do that, including parents reading aloud complex texts to their kids before they can read. Teachers can do that, too. It should not only be a practice of educated parents to read out loud—years beyond their kids' ability to access that text—Harry Potter to a five or six-year-old. Why can't that happen in schools? That is the kind of practice we need to introduce and make commonplace. Those don't clash with the goals of balanced literacy—to make reading a joy and to make lifelong learners. There's a bit of confusion about that. Kids need the muscles to become agile, lifelong readers, and they are not getting those reading muscles through current practices.

**David:** I will approach this question somewhat differently. There are three ways children learn to read in this country—or don't learn to read. I'll start with what is still most common, and that is the basal reader approach. Basals now do include a grade-level, complex text, and then they have leveled texts that teachers use when they slough off the kids after having read the complex text. There is now research, named in a new report called “The Opportunity Myth,” on how many teachers actually use the complex text and certainly not research on how many teachers spend much time on the complex text.<sup>1</sup> That [basal reader approach] is still the majority, but it's the shrinking majority. There are certainly fewer teachers using basal readers than were 10 years ago.

The second most popular is what usually falls under the umbrella of balanced literacy—Fountas & Pinnell Classroom, or the Teacher's College Reading and Writing Workshop Program, or schools that have adopted the approach without necessarily purchasing those materials. In that situation, nobody is reading a complex text

except students already reading at or above grade level. Nobody else gets the chance to get there. Everybody gets a lesson, usually on a comprehension strategy or a standard, and then goes off and reads their own-level text. All those programs have increased [use of] nonfiction, but they are still leveled-text programs because that is their DNA. They are not going to put a grade-level text in front of everybody. Their belief is that if kids work with texts at their level, have a lesson where they hear a text read [to them] at grade-level complexity, and maybe do a little work with it, then that will do the job. It won't. There is no research showing this working except in the earliest grades, and we now have a good deal of research showing that texts at a variety of levels works better.

There is a third way that kids are learning to read. This is exemplified in five core ELA programs: Core Knowledge Language Arts, Bookworms, Wit and Wisdom (by Great Minds, the same people who did Eureka Math), American Reading Company, and EL Education. Those programs are in use now in the neighborhood of 3,000 schools, which is not nothing. These approaches are entirely different, in that they are not balanced literacy as we usually see it, they're not guided reading, and they're not leveled reading. They have a core text at grade level that most of the time is also connected to a topic in order to grow knowledge, and then students read additional texts on that same topic at their own level. That's an entirely different plan for teaching kids to read that has never been done before on a large scale—it's a huge difference: One, it's conveying knowledge. Two, everybody's reading a grade-level complex text. Three, kids do go off and read other text at their current levels—which they have to do in order to grow knowledge and grow vocabulary—but it's not apartheid. They are all reading their own texts; they are all being exposed to grade-level complex text, too.

It's not that students are suddenly all reading at grade level. But everybody is reading texts they can understand connected to the central topic. In most cases, students are choosing these other texts. Teachers in these programs report their weakest readers are more motivated and involved than ever before, and this is because they are reading the core complex texts with everybody else. They do not spend

the longest, most important part of the day separated by reading level. Everybody's focus is on the topic—whether it is explorers, sports and society, or habitats. The kids who are the weak readers do not have this feeling that they are somehow separate and lower. That makes an extraordinary difference in the culture and the feeling of the school and the classroom. And this follows the science of reading.

These new types of core ELA programs are beginning to gain market share. In terms of how children read and how children feel about reading and about themselves—because it's very difficult to feel good about yourself in a school setting if you can't read—I think these programs are the only way the needle is going to move. Anything else is moving the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic.

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### Can you talk about the lagging adolescent reader and the need for remediation?

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**David:** Funny you should ask.

**Meredith:** We have a book on foundational reading coming out in May that addresses this. It's from Learning Science International, and it's called *Know Better, Do Better: Teaching the Foundations so Every Child Can Read*.

**David:** I'm not going to go into the guts of it, just the implications. The reason why catching up students who are behind is so difficult is that they don't just have problems with actual reading, foundations, decoding, and fluency. They absolutely have those problems, but that's not all. If you can't read, you enter a trajectory where three things don't develop for you that do develop for proficient readers: their knowledge of the world grows, their knowledge of words grows, and their ability to read increasingly complex text grows. The students who enter third grade roughly proficient enter a virtuous cycle: Each of those factors grows the others. The more you can read more complex text, the more words you will learn, and the more words you learn, the more you'll be able to learn to use those words to learn about the world. If you don't enter that trajectory, you enter another trajectory where everything grows less or not at all. That's a downward spiral. And therefore, a child who needs to be remediated needs to

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**Kids need the muscles to become agile, lifelong readers, and they are not getting those reading muscles through current practices.**

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**See whatever power you can wield and wield it, with two things in mind: One, what we've been doing hasn't worked! So two, we have to do something entirely different.**

be remediated on everything she failed to get along that trajectory: Her knowledge has to grow, her vocabulary has to grow, her experience with and ability to read complex text has to grow—and also you have to undo the emotional damage that being a weak reader has done to that child all those years. If you don't address all four, absolutely nothing will happen. That is why—despite tens of millions if not hundreds of millions of words and dollars—there has not been one remediation effort that has proven successful at scale. Not one. I don't even know if there's one that's proven successful at one school. We have a proposal for designing a course for students entering the ninth grade years behind that addresses all of this. The chances of finding someone brave enough to implement a unique course that overhauls systemic reading failure and deals with it in a holistic fashion: slim. But maybe there is someone out there.

**Meredith:** We are trying to tackle this problem. We're looking for a partner to pilot that course and publishers who are willing to modify materials to make them suitable for students who are entering high school far behind. It does take a radical redesign.

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**What do you see as the policy ecosystem enabling the sort of instruction you recommend, given that state boards don't generally select curriculum? Are there policy levers to promote it or are there barriers to remove?**

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**Meredith:** Eight states are working together on materials acquisition principles. They are branching out into new teacher policy and new teacher induction—exactly what you are talking about—and they are committed to developing best practices as well as learning from each other. Nebraska's capable chief academic officer, Cory Epler, called Student Achievement Partners to come out to conduct professional learning around two of the basal programs in widespread use in his state: Reading Wonders and Journeys. We did a bit of a Trojan horse: We did show the attending districts materials adaptation for both of those basals. But all our examples of alignment and best practice came from one of the five curricula that David just described. So we showed them what excellent

looked like, and then we said, but this isn't what you are using, so here's what you have to do to make Wonders and Journeys sort of work. There have been loads of follow-up calls from those districts, asking SAP for more guidance, information, and support around procurement.

Louisiana tackled the policies on all fronts, and they did it with a hostile legislature fighting them every step of the way. By creating favorable pricing for resources fully aligned to their ELA standards, they incented good decision making and then left districts on their own to make those decisions. So if you want to make a bad choice, you have to pay to do it in Louisiana. Even if it is just scaled agreements like that, that is a powerful thing and an underexploited opportunity. Now they are tackling teacher licensure and training equally vigorously.

**David:** Napoleon escaped from Elba with only a few men and when stopped and confronted, said something like, "Surely, you're not going to kill your emperor." And then he proceeded to nearly take all of Europe once again. I think it would take a Napoleon at this point to fix American education entirely. So my advice to a state board would be something along these lines: See whatever power you can wield and wield it, with two things in mind: One, what we've been doing hasn't worked! So two, we have to do something entirely different. And in ELA, there are entirely different approaches out there. Do whatever you can to get your districts to adopt one of those programs. And don't just go by reports on curriculum alignments. Just because they're aligned with academic standards doesn't mean they're right for your districts. Our government says GM pickups and Priuses are safe to be on the road, but that doesn't mean they are the same vehicles. These ELA programs are all really different from each other while all being aligned. My advice is for state boards to use the bully pulpit. Because you don't have much de jure power, use what de facto power you have to a) change the materials acquisition process and b) change it in the right direction. I don't think it's a matter of policy, I think it's a matter of personality and force—that is, using the bully pulpit. If you get one or two or three districts in your state to do the right thing, they are going to get results in two or three years, and that might influence other people.

## What should state boards with authority to approve teacher licensure, preparation programs, and assessments consider?

**Meredith:** State school boards could really lead. Colorado is just starting an effort to reexamine licensure when ed schools go for reevaluation. There's an organization, the U.S. Teacher Inspectorate, that is modeled after the British reviewing system. Louisiana, for example, has contracted with them to review their new apprenticeship and residency models. That is something for universities to stand up and take notice of. Many education professors in universities' teacher preparation programs don't know the science of reading. It's hard enough for teachers to admit they are doing something wrong and harming kids. For someone who got their Ph.D. dissertation 20 years ago, they are going to keep barking up that tree for the rest of their careers. They are dug in. Who is it that says, "Physics advances one funeral at a time," David?

**David:** Max Planck said it. The problem is that there are way more education professors than there are physics professors. So waiting for them to die takes a lot longer. And similar to any good horror film, and any good monster, they recreate themselves.

**Meredith:** There has to be a course on the science of reading, which could create the same groundswell that we started this conversation talking about: a three-credit course on what is known about how the brain processes the English language in written form. That course should be required for everybody because you've got this pernicious problem that kids can't read in older grades, and their teachers are completely in the dark; they have no equipment for helping those students. You already have that expertise in micro in the special education departments. That holds true whenever I talk to recently licensed teachers, as it does from my own teacher prep experience from the mid-1980s: The only careful instruction I got was when I took special ed teacher prep courses. That expertise and those syllabi can simply be shared, for now, as a starting point until new courses are developed. There are already some good starts.

The other thing to do would be something like the bar exam for licensing lawyers. There is now no accountability for the product they are turning out at any state university when they graduate teachers. Track through: How effective are these teacher graduates in their first few years at the schools they are going to? How much work do the school districts have to do to create minimally ready teachers?

We also have to ask whether the Praxis is measuring what makes for good practitioners. Right now, it's our bar, but it's not an effective one. Very competent practitioners get pulled out of education because they can't meet the bar on the Praxis—having nothing to do with how effective they are in teaching their students. And what is the Praxis doing to help put candidates of color in front of students of color—with all the benefits we know that provides? We need to somehow elevate the teaching profession as a serious alternative for people of color in this country so kids have more role models and there is a viable pathway to the middle class and college. That has to be part of the answer, too. Teacher shortages are terrifying me, that we are not seen as a noble profession for people to go into. Then there's a longer-term societal question: Do we value education enough to pay teachers to be professionals?

**David:** I'll talk about student assessments. Step number one is pretty straightforward. There are assessments available that have been universally used for years now: [for example,] the TOWRE Test of Word Reading Efficiency. It has two parts: one on word recognition and one decoding, the difference being that the word recognition tests are actual words and the decoding part is nonsense words, so you can ascertain that the student can actually decode and has not memorized the word. Those assessments determine, along with fluency assessments, student proficiency, and they have a long history. They are not used in schools for a number of reasons. One, teachers are afraid to be held accountable in these early grades. Two, there is an idea that if you give a kid a test in the first grades, even if it's only 15 minutes, he will grow up to be a mass murderer or worse. Yet as an Annie E. Casey study has shown, the early grades are pivotal, by far more important than any other grade. These are concrete, research-based, proven ways to assess student progress

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**Track through: How effective are these teacher graduates in their first few years at the schools they are going to? How much work do the school districts have to do to create minimally ready teachers?**

in beginning reading in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Mandate that these tests are given. If you have the power to do it, do it. They are simple, and they do not take a lot of time.

There's a brilliant teacher professional development course called LETRS, designed by Louisa Moats, although I would add a comprehension piece, addressing knowledge and vocabulary, but that's eminently fixable. And you say elementary teachers who graduate from your teacher preparation program have to pass this assessment. If you take the course and pass it, you are done. Nothing else you need to do. Mandate that for teacher licensure for elementary teaching, and start assessment of student progress in kindergarten, first, and second and focus on reading itself. ■

<sup>14</sup>"The Opportunity Myth" reports on an exhaustive review of thousands of student assignments and finds that only 17 percent of the assignments they reviewed met the standards for their grade level. Most assignments (including assigned readings) were below grade level. "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us about How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It" (Washington, DC: TNT, 2018).

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*cont'd from page 27... Writing Standards*

Of course, supports to help educators use these resources to meet their students' writing needs will be necessary. These include multi-modal, practice-based professional development, intensive coaching, and peer-to-peer mentoring networks in which teachers pilot, refine, and reflect on implementation of curricula and associated materials. ■

<sup>15</sup>National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "The Neglected R: The Need for a Writing Revolution" (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2003); National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "Writing: A Ticket to Work...or a Ticket Out. A Survey of Business Leaders" (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>For instance, in a nationally representative sample of 700 adolescents, 85 percent reported using some form of electronic personal communication (e.g., text messages, social network posts, blogs, emails) for daily social interaction, self-exploration and expression, and reflection on current events. See National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "Writing, Technology, and Teens," Pew Internet and American Life Project (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2008); A.H.S. Harris, "Does Expressive Writing Reduce Health Care Utilization? A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Trials," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 74 (2006): 243–52.

<sup>3</sup>Reports on writing assessment are available on the Nation's

Report Card website maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>4</sup>Laura Cutler and Steve Graham, "Primary Grade Writing Instruction: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 100 (2008): 907–19; Sharlene Kiuahara et al., "Teaching Writing to High School Students: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101 (2009): 136–60.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen P. Klein et al., "What Do Test Scores in Texas Tell Us?" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8, no. 49 (2000): 1–20; Peggy O'Neill et al., "What Teachers Say about Different Kinds of Mandated State Writing Tests," *Journal of Writing Assessment* 2, no. 2 (2006): 81–108.

<sup>6</sup>Gary A. Troia et al., "Content and Alignment of State Writing Standards and Assessments as Predictors of Student Writing Achievement: An Analysis of 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress Data," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 31 (2018): 835–64.

<sup>7</sup>Michael B. Henderson et al., "The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform: Public Thinking on Testing, Opt Out, Common Core, Unions, and More," *Education Next* 16, no. 1 (2016): 9–20.

<sup>8</sup>Gary A. Troia and Steve Graham, "Common Core Writing and Language Standards and Aligned State Assessments: A National Survey of Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 29 (2016): 1719–43.

<sup>9</sup>Lasisi Ajayi, "High School Teachers' Perspectives on the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: An Exploratory Study," *Education Research for Policy and Practice* 15 (2016): 1–25; Audrey F. Murphy and Elizabeth Haller, "Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Literacy Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 29 (2015): 510–27.

<sup>10</sup>National Commission on Writing, "The Neglected R."

<sup>11</sup>Cutler and Graham, "Primary Grade Writing Instruction"; Ruie J. Pritchard and Ronald L. Honeycutt, "The Process Approach to Writing Instruction: Examining Its Effectiveness," In Charles A. MacArthur et al., eds., *Handbook of Writing Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2006); Gary A. Troia and Mary E. Maddox, "Writing Instruction in Middle Schools: Special and General Education Teachers Share Their Views and Voice Their Concerns," *Exceptionality* 12 (2004): 19–37.

<sup>12</sup>Gary A. Troia and Natalie G. Olinghouse, "The Common Core State Standards and Evidence-Based Educational Practices: The Case of Writing," *School Psychology Review* 42 (2013): 343–57.

<sup>13</sup>Gary A. Troia et al., "The Common Core Writing Standards: A Descriptive Study of Content and Alignment with a Sample of Former State Standards," *Reading Horizons Journal* 55, no. 3 (2016): 98–141.

<sup>14</sup>Sheila Byrd Carmichael et al., "The State of the State Standards—and Common Core—in 2010" (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation & Institute, 2010).

<sup>15</sup>Steve Graham and Karen R. Harris, "Common Core State Standards, Writing, and Students with LD: Recommendations," *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* 28 (2013): 28–37.

<sup>16</sup>Troia and Maddox, "Writing Instruction in Middle Schools"; Jennifer Gilbert and Steve Graham, "Teaching Writing to Elementary Students in Grades 4 to 6: A National Survey," *The Elementary School Journal* 110 (2010): 494–518.

<sup>17</sup>Karen R. Harris et al., "Bring Powerful Writing Strategies into Your Classroom!" *The Reading Teacher* 66 (2013): 538–42.

# We the Media

We are learning no fewer than 30 sight words at our house. Every evening at bedtime, our four-year-old scans the pages of her storybooks for words she recognizes and beams when she spots one. She surprised me when she proclaimed she saw a sight word during this year's Super Bowl half-time performance, where "One" Love was projected in the sky. Clearly, our little girl is excited about reading!

As a parent, I know I have done the right things to encourage this. My husband and I read to our daughters daily and encourage storytelling. We practice writing the alphabet and find ways to incorporate learning during playtime and special outings. Not every child has these same opportunities, though. Evelyn and her classmates came home with a list of sight words but no other instructions for how to use them effectively or what else we should do to foster reading. Even I—a parent presumably in the know about all those right things—have wondered whether my methods are setting the strongest possible foundation for my daughter. What is a parent to do?

Turns out, literacy—especially teaching the "right way" to read—remains a hot topic in the media. Emily Hanford of American Public Media has written and produced an extensive series on reading instruction and concludes that teachers are woefully undereducated on how to teach their students to read effectively. She argues phonics is the way to go and that more focus on it will fix reading gaps. Indeed, research shows phonics is critical to early reading instruction. But it is not a silver bullet. Research also

suggests that too much time spent on phonics leaves other areas of reading development in a deficit. Things like context, vocabulary, and concept knowledge, which are strong predictors of long-term reading and writing success, also need attention, writes researcher and reading expert Nell Duke, an author in this issue of the *Standard*.

Other authors in this issue take equally measured looks at how policymakers can and should interpret the reading wars arguments to make sound policy decisions around literacy, especially for our most vulnerable students. They make clear that literacy issues are complex and that policies to address them should be multifaceted and consider the full spectrum of research. As educators Jared Myracle, Brian Kingsley, and Robin McClellan write in a recent *Education Week* op-ed, "Literacy work is a both/and, not either/or."

As you read through the articles in this issue, think about how parents would interpret them. Chances are, while your board is busy gathering knowledge and convening the brightest literacy experts to help inform your policymaking, parents and teachers in your state may not be getting their information from the same vetted sources. Hear what they have to say and what literacy issues concern them most. But most important, communicate the *why* in your policymaking decisions early and often, and work with local districts to ensure the implementation of literacy policies, whatever they require, are inclusive of families and meet their needs. ■



**Renée Rybak Lang**  
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## from the President's Pen

The terms literacy and equity are frequently bandied about in the headlines of the education press—and rightly so. Both are of great importance to state boards of education. Yet more often than not, they are examined in isolation when they are inextricably linked.

While reading scores have been fairly flat across all groups for some time, the data are clear that students of color, students living in poverty, students from marginalized communities, and those whose first language is not English perform much more poorly in reading than their more privileged peers. As Nell Duke so adeptly points out in the lead article, “Reading by Third Grade: How Policymakers Can Foster Early Literacy,” the United States has more pronounced learning gaps based on these factors than other industrialized nations.

Yes, the issue is complex and the solutions are hard, but the evidence is clear: All students are not receiving equitable opportunities to learn or the services they need to help them succeed. This is true not only for instruction in reading and literacy but in all subject areas. But because of its foundational role in paving the road to success across disciplines, we chose to focus in this edition on literacy.

So what can state boards of education do to move the needle on literacy? I’m glad you asked. First and foremost, state boards must build their knowledge about the equity context for that instruction. Understanding the historical pursuit of equity, understanding interventions that past state boards have attempted, and using that knowledge to build a vision, mission, and strategic plans to address systemic educational inequities are all

prerequisites. For this work, state board members need not be reading specialists or literacy gurus.

Second, state boards must learn how to apply an equity lens to their policy work, asking informed questions about education data and seeking out the disaggregated data needed to form a picture of inequities within their state education systems. This skill building involves members discussing equity issues with their own boards and asking probing questions of themselves and their leadership regarding the pursuit of equity. In addition, board members must be able and willing to lead conversations about equity with a variety of audiences in their state, including advocating for their board to reflect the students they serve.

Third and arguably most important, state boards will advance equity through policymaking by evaluating the impact of their policies on students of diverse backgrounds and using that knowledge to determine which policies can most effectively close learning gaps in their state. Engaging multiple voices that reflect diverse students in the deliberations around policymaking is the only way to do this work effectively.

State board members must become experts on equity if they are going to move the needle on literacy. They *must* ensure that the voices and needs of students of diverse backgrounds and circumstances inform all policies and practices their boards adopt. That is the only way that the nation can collectively deliver on the promise of an equitable education in which all students receive what they need to thrive in school, work, and life. ■